INTRODUCTION: CRITICAL THEOLOGY AGAINST
US MILITARISM IN ASIA: DECOLONIZATION
AND DEIMPERIALIZATION

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US MILITARISM IN ASIA

The year 2015 marked the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II, the seventieth memorial of atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, and the fiftieth anniversary of US Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that had reopened the US borders for immigrants from Asia. The year 2015 also was fortieth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, or what some call the American War, which passed the US Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 that permitted war refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia to enter the US. For the past 60 years, the US has engaged in various wars, including the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the first Gulf War (aka Operation Desert Storm), war in Afghanistan, and war against Iraq (aka Operation Iraqi Freedom) under the banner of freedom, democracy, liberation, and human rights. Asia has long been a first, key stage for the US’s global fight against communism, and recently against terrorism. Part of the deadly genius of the fundamental logic of “War on Terror” is its rootedness in a logic of preemption that allows for wars without ends. This logic is simple yet lethal. As lethal as the deterrence of the Cold War, the logic of preemption relies on the affective perception of the US for any and all possible and potential threats. If the US “feels” there is a possible threat to the security of the US or to its interests around the world, it has given itself license to wage war based on that perception of possible impending threat with a preemptive strike. The US has now sanctioned itself to go to war anywhere and anytime for any reason it deems a threat. While the “official” Cold War may have ended,

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91. The emerging medical understanding of bacteria was the other basis for the perception of the US occupation as a battle against biological threats, not only traditional military ones. Yet unlike guerrilla soldiers, microbes could never be seen directly (other than in a laboratory). The relatively nascent state of bacteriological medicine contributed to a sense of the omnipresence of infectious agents: it was known that bacteria were the cause of various serious illnesses, yet because the precise modes of transmission were not known in many cases, multiple aspects of the environment posed unseen health risks—wetlands, decaying vegetation, damp topographies, livestock, and so on. Even one’s fellow soldier could be a threat if he did not observe proper cleaning and waste disposal. See Anderson, 58–61.


93. Ibid., 49, 8.

94. Moreover, “the care and disciplining of white troops would come to serve as a guide to how natives might be enforced...” Anderson, 17.

95. As the occupation persisted, local health bureaucrats came to be staffed by Filipino elites, even as the Philippines-wide authorities were US officials.

96. Ibid., 52.

97. Ibid., 49–51.

98. Ibid., 40.

99. Ibid., 66, 76, 68.

100. “Progressive American doctors imagined themselves eventually, many generations hence, producing germ-free Filipino citizens; it is in this sense that colonial hygiene became a liberal strategy of deferential, not exclusion.” Ibid., 3–4.


CHAPTER 6

Killing Time

Jonathan Tran

James Henry remembers the killing. And he can’t sleep. Half a century later he still recalls the atrocious images, the slaughter, the brutality of America’s so-called good intentions for the world. Although he’d rather get some sleep, remembering may be the only thing that separates him from animals—or more directly, remembering may be the only thing that makes Henry human. As Friedrich Nietzsche described, Henry “cannot learn to forget but clings relentlessly to the past: however far and fast he may run, this chain runs with him. And it is a matter of wonder: a moment, now here and then gone, nothing before it came, again nothing after it has gone; nonetheless returns as a ghost and disturbs the peace of a later moment.” Those around him—especially those for whom he killed—would rather Henry forget or at least shut up about all he remembers. Against America’s demand to forget, Henry remembers, and as Nietzsche avers, this is what makes him human. Unlike the animals that live unhistorically, Henry gets to—has to—remember. All animals kill, human animals remember.
In the following chapter, I investigate a conception of time that I call the "new sense of boredom." While the frenetic drive of the domino theory to contain an incessant threat compelled what we now call "the Vietnam War," its actual delivery hit the ground walking like so many grunts bumping strange and dangerous lands. As the US set its sights on a new world armed with its domino-theory-inspired geographical imagination, most Americans in Vietnam just wanted to get home. Although the domino could fall at any time, the year that made up the infantryman's conscripted tour of duty could not end soon enough, sluggishly marching from moment to moment in days that stretched out like eternity. The seemingly opposite experiences of fast time and slow time are two sides of the same temporal imagination, timekeeping adulthood from its eternal horizon, intensified and flattened in order to sustain life in the far country. Throughout I attempt to arrive at some understanding of the Vietnam War using classical Christian doctrines, most specifically conceptions of time and eternity. Specifically, I turn to Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas to theologically frame Vietnam War atrocities as a theological problem. I utilize christological and trinitarian lenses not only to theorize the war's complex eventualities but also to offer alternatives, which might save us from our own base tendencies.

I first recount Henry's story and the frightening specifics that haunt life after Vietnam. I briefly relate a history that Henry has been telling ever since. His account has been denied, investigated, and denied again because it is a re-presentation of a past that the US has tried to forget—because its very iteration challenges the deployment of patriotism and commitments one holds to the nation and people. I then attempt to portray atrocity as a presence of time's good use: boredom with the everyday. For human animals—that is, those for whom the world comes through language—existence subsists between potentiality and actuality, from moment to moment, vis-a-vis existence that unfolds as past, present, and future. In the tensed interaction between promise and fulfillment, boredom threatens. Rather than wait for potentiality's actuality, rather than dwell in the moments of time, boredom demands immediate satisfaction, with impatience rushing forward as the driving force of a new temporal economy. This use of time, already having given up eternity, settles in what theologian Catherine Pickston calls "immanentist rituals." Violent assertions of an unleashed will gone berserk. I juxtapose this boredom with a conception of divine eternity, which places creatively life internal to the divine life. By doing so, God's presence is evinced in the very structure of created existence. In Thomas Aquinas' densely material temporality, time unfolds between potentiality and actuality in a way that underscores divine and creaturely difference. Rather than designating time, this difference heralds God's contemporaneous eternity. An enduring simultaneity sacralizes the ordinary and makes time a relational analog between God and creatures.

In 1994, by decree of the Freedom of Information Act, the US government declassified thousands of documents chronicling almost 800 reported incidents of what the US military considered war crimes committed by US soldiers in Vietnam. These documents, compiled in a series of reports by the wartime Vietnam War Crimes Working Group, are currently housed at the National Archives, College Park Campus. These records and their sheer volume testify to the (common) occurrence of criminal behavior among US frontline soldiers. Although each crime deserves careful attention and recognition, this chapter cannot properly attend to most of the horrendous things that occurred during the Vietnam War. Instead, I focus on a few, which unfortunately only repeats atrocity's two-fold eraque: violence followed by forgetting.

I preface this chapter by iterating that atrocity is not so much unreasonable as indestructible. Any account of atrocity is at best one among many. No definitive explanation for atrocity can ever be. By its nature, atrocity defies rationality; marking the very limits of understanding. Part of the terror of atrocity is that it seeks to destroy meaning; as if to rend discourse altogether. This claim differs from characterizing atrocity as unreasonable or branding war criminals irrational. Indeed, many war crimes are frighteningly rational, devoid of the very affect that might otherwise save us from the conclusions of cold hard logic. Memories of atrocity doggedly endure because they refuse induction into framing narratives. However, the inability to theorize atrocity is very likely a good thing. We would be advised to hold on to these caveats; otherwise, we might find ourselves unwrapping voyeurs entertained by the many barbarisms of our age.

**Boredom and Atrocity**

On February 8, 1968, James Henry's 3rd Platoon came upon 19 unarmed women and children. Operating under the directive to "kill everything that moves," the platoon turned their automatic weapons on the civilians: "It was over in a few seconds. There was a lot of blood and flesh and stuff flying around from the velocity of the M-16's at that close a range." Henry later reported, "Incidents similar to those I have described occur on a daily basis and differ one from the other only in terms of numbers..."
killed." Indeed, this civilian massacre was not even the first Henry had witnessed that day. By mid-morning, the platoon had already waylaid many civilians, raped a young woman, and murdered an older man: "He was held down on the ground and the APC [armored personnel carrier] ran him over twice. They drove over him forward which didn’t kill him because he was squirming around, so the APC backed over him again." Recalling his tour, Henry testified to the following:

We operated west of Cho Lai, and on the 8th of October 1967, we got into a fire fight. It was my first fire fight and at that time I witnessed a 12 year old boy executed for no reason by a medic. I didn’t actually see the body executed. Somebody caught him up on a hill and they brought him down and the Lieutenant asked who wanted to kill him, who wanted to shoot him. Two guys, an RTO and a medic said they did. The RTO kicked the boy in the stomach and the medic took him around behind a rock and I heard one magazine go off completely on automatic. This took place during a rainstorm. At that point the Captain called up and asked what happened. The shooting was reported as a KIA. The Captain asked where the body was and they said it was going down the river. Nobody told the Captain it was a 12 year-old boy who was unarmed and didn’t have anything on but shorts. After that we saw in the field a couple more weeks and we went into base camp on Hill 488.1 think I’m not sure about the hill number. 1st Platoon went out on a night ambush from there. I was told by men of the 1st Platoon that they raped and executed five women which they caught in their ambush. Men of the other platoons later went down and saw the bodies. From there we went to LZ Bally which was made our base camp. Of course, the company spent almost all this time in the field. We’d come in about once a month for two or three days stand down, sometimes for five days if we were lucky. Prior to Bally I saw a man executed in a cave. 2nd Platoon had found him sleeping in his coffin. I heard the Lieutenant in charge of 2nd Platoon ask the Captain for permission to test fire a weapon which I thought was normal procedure. I was relatively new in the country. I heard the firing as I walked and I heard small arms firing, M-16 and .50 caliber fire. As I walked through the bamboo, I saw this man sitting upright against the wall of a little cave and everybody was taking pot shots at him seeing how accurate they were.

How does one make sense of such behavior? According to Henry, those who murdered "are as much victims of the war as the people they have killed." For Henry, culpability lies not at the feet of the murderers or rapists, but at the feet of the war’s architects, policymakers of an abstract governance. 

Reflecting on his adolescent thievery, Augustine writes, "I had no motive for my wickedness except wickedness itself. It was final and I loved it. I loved the self-destruction, I loved my fall, the object for which I had fallen but my fall itself... I was seeking not to gain anything by shame-ful means, but shame for its own sake." Augustine finds himself earlier "amused" by sin, depraved for the sake of depravity, thrilled by thrill. Like the young Augustine, US soldiers in Vietnam found the civilian villagers easy pickings. "The reins were relaxed to allow me to amuse myself. There was no strict discipline to keep me in check, which led to an unbridled insolence in many different directions." We might call this unbridled insolence boredom. Augustine interprets the mindless appetite as being in love with being in love. For Augustine, right love desires roots appropriate to its nature. Disordered love seeks wrong things, and even worse, no thing in particular. The will that wills nothing tends toward destruction. Armed with will and being yet uninterested in their right ends, willing spins wildly out of control, going nowhere, and finally, unchecked, imploding atrociously. Empty desire breeds atrocity as asserion for the sake of assertion spews mutation: what John Milbank describes as an "impossible quest to exact such positivity, which can in reality only unleash a bad infinity of further and further privation, since being will not permit any final solution, any finished or perfected evil." The atrocities committed by Americans in Vietnam did not obtain solely by the transitory panic of their overconfident domino theory foreign policy. Rather, a different type of terror, fitted to a different temporal register, materialized in a peculiar boredom. Quoting Tim O’Brien’s Vietnam War memoir:

I remember the monotony. Digging foxholes. Slapping mosquitoes. The sun and the threat and the endless paddles. Even in the deep bush, where you could die any number of ways, the war was nakedly and aggressively boring. But it was a strange boredom. It was boredom with a twist, the kind of boredom that caused stomach disorders. You’d be sitting at the top of a hill, the flat paddies stretching out below, and the day would be calm and hot and utterly vacant, and you’d feel the boredom oozing inside you like a leaky faucet, except it wasn’t water, it was a sort of acid, and with each little dropper you’d feel the stuff eating away at important organs. You’d try to relax. You’d uncurl your legs and let your thoughts go. Well, you’d think this isn’t so bad. And right then you’d beat gunfire behind you and your men would fly up into your throat and you’d be squeezing pig squeals. That kind of boredom."
In contrast to the domino theory’s frenetic fast time, slow time oversees its own brand of dangers. It stretches minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, until time takes the form of infinite repetition, cycling back on itself with no end in sight. This temporal black hole seemed to extend the soldiers’ DEROS (Date of Expected Return from Overseas) indefinitely. Between arrival “in country” and date of departure lay millions of chances to never get out, packing time with immeasurable perils. Thus, O’Brien speaks of a “strange boredom,” the kind that “caused stomach disorders.” For front-line infantrymen, death waits in time, hidden in the minute details of each moment, camouflaged in the landscape of the everyday.

The aggressive and naked boredom of Vietnam commonly issued as a desire for action. Days and weeks without facing or even glimpsing the enemy, following weeks of anticipation and months of training, heightened soldiers’ appetite for battle. After predictions of “a real firefight,” soldiers often felt disappointed, even depressed, when instead of NVA regulars, they found themselves face to face with water buffalo or farmers tending muddy rice paddies. M-16’s ready, M-79 grenade launchers loaded, the soldiers, itching for something to happen, had nothing to do, no one to shoot, nothing to kill. The relief of escaping death, yet again, mixed with a haunted excitement, relishing time into something else: boredom with life.

On the morning of March 16, 1968, one of the US America Division’s highest-achieving units approached the area of Son My, nine kilometers north of Quang Ngai near the South China Sea.10 Expecting to engage the enemy’s formidable 48th Local Force Battalion, the unit was disoriented to find the hamlet Xom Lang crowded with women, elderly men, and children. With no one to fight, the soldiers took matters into their own hands. Over the next hours, members of Charlie Company would rape, torture, and murder hundreds of unarmed civilians. Consider, harrowing as they are, the following firsthand accounts:

- “Get up at 0630 and we left 0715. We had nine choppers and two lifters. We started to move slowly through the village, shooting everything in sight, children, men, women, and animals.” — Thomas Purcell, Criminal Investigations Division (CID) statement, October 21, 1969.
- “Fragmentation grenades were tossed inside; homes were sprayed with automatic fire. Children aged only 6 or 7... asked for food and cries they had received from other American soldiers... the soldiers syphoned them down.” — Denis Bunning, CID statement December 7, 1969.

They stood only ten feet from their hapless victims, changing magazines from time to time. The Vietnamese screamed, yelled, and tried to get up. It was pure carnage as heads were shot off along with limbs; the fleshier body parts were ripped to shreds.” — Donald Comis, CID statement, October 30, 1969.

“Comis found a woman aged about 20 with a 4 year old child. He forced her to perform oral sex on him while he held a gun at the child’s head, threatening to kill it.” — William Callan, trial transcript, p. 8818, National Archives.

“The Americans were rounding up the people and shooting them, not taking any prisoners. It was completely different to my concept of what war is all about.” — Ronald Heberer, personal interview.

“Many women were raped and sodomized, mutilated, and had their vaginas ripped open with knives and bayonets. One woman was killed when the muzzle of a rifle barrel was inserted into her vagina and the trigger was pulled. Soldiers repeatedly stabbed their victims, cut off limbs, sometimes beheaded them. Some were scalped; others had their tongues cut out or their throats slit or both... beaten with fists and tortured, stabbed with rifles, and stabbed in the back with bayonets... Other victims were mutilated with ‘C Company’ or the shape of an Ace of Spades carved into the chest.” — Tommy Lee Mou and Sgt. Martin Fagan, testimony to Lt. Gen. William R. Peer, January 6, 1970.

“I went to turn her over and there was a little baby with her that I had also killed. The baby’s face was half gone. My mind just went blank. The training came me and I just started killing. Old men, women, children, water buffaloes, everything... I cut their throats, cut off their hands, cut out their tongue, their hair, scalped them. I did it. A lot of people were doing it and I just followed. I just lost all sense of direction... Do you realize what it was like killing live hundred people in a matter of four or five hours? It’s just like the gas chambers... what Hitler did. You line up fifty people, women, old men, children, and just mow ’em down.” — Vernado Simpson, personal interview.

Years later, this incident came to be known as the My Lai Massacre and represented for many the nature of the war itself. It was if the Vietnam War boiled down to My Lai—young US Americans raping and torturing innocent Vietnamese civilians.
Clearly, the long shadow of the My Lai Massacre plays a role in framing certain images in the popular imagination. However, neither every act of killing that took place in Vietnam, nor even most, could be labeled “atrocious.” To label all the killing so mischaracterizes the moral type of the war’s killing — rendering a moral universe in which all cats are gray — and, more importantly, deflates the weight of atrocity as a moral description. However, the larger ethical question such observations press is how Americans should remember the war and morally evaluate its specific acts of killing, determine whether indeed the war was unjust. If it is the case that with 20:20 hindsight, we label the American War in Vietnam unjust, then does that brand each act of killing unjust as well? Or do so many unjust acts of war render an otherwise just war unjust? Even if most of the killing that took place during the war could not be labeled atrocity, still, killing in Vietnam has taken on the weight of something like atrocity for many US Vietnam veterans, who continue to struggle with their actions during the war. Hence, Vietnam War atrocities articulate a deeper sense regarding the war in general. Not every act of killing was an act of atrocity. Yet somehow, all the war’s acts of killing have come to carry the stigma of atrocity because of the myriad circumstances of the war and the ambiguous status of its killing. In that sense at least, many acts in that war now feel like atrocity. So while equating Vietnam with atrocity grossly misconstrues the war, it speaks to a lingering sense of the war as recurrent memory.

Killing became a way of passing time. In a war without shape or purpose, death and dying provided a simulacrum of meaning: the absurdly constructed illusion that life counted for more than pointlessly wandering over hills and through jungles. For some, even the pulse-quenching thrill of battle was not enough. They sought increasing intimacy with death and suffering, lasting after not only death, but also death up close, wanting not only to see the enemy, but also to possess him, forcing an enemy who refused to fight fair into something he could touch, hold, ravage, and even take away.

Boredom’s slow time differs in significant ways from the domino theory’s fast time, but both speak of time bereft of its sacramental shape. To argue that boredom necessarily produces atrocity would be ludicrous. Nonetheless, one can see atrocity as the product of a type of boredom, the intensification of the “strange boredom” that stuffs temporal panic into seemingly eternal minutes. This is not the hysteria with large loaded over by distant civilian commanders, who devise the policies of disembodied abstractions often thought of as war policy. Rather, this hysteria inhabits the frighteningly normal, a strange juxtaposition of regular life — days, calendars, seasons, worn trails, familiar tree lines, ancestral lands — and blood-letting that is frankly awe-inspiring, the numbing transformation of normal space into so-classified free-fire zones. DEROS stretched into 565 days, broken up into 52 weeks, comprising 8760 hours, during which the combat soldier endured 526,600 minutes, living through 31,560,000 moments during which anything could happen. In each instance, the soldier would either die or survive — until the next bootie-trapped second. As one soldier weighed in, “Here, death could come from anywhere at any time.”22 The sheer randomness of death — without meaning, purpose, or shape — abdicated each to his own terrifyingly slow time, making him shamefully grateful that his pal, rather than he, stepped on the indiscriminate landmine. Humping on, and on, and on. Within this frenetically barren space, anything could happen, even the unimaginable.

Political theorist Sheldon Wolin writes that “…the temporality of economy and popular culture are dictated by innovation, change, and replacement through obsolescence. Accordingly time is not governed by the needs of deliberation but by those of rapid turnover.”23 In contrast to “cultivating, taking care of, nurturing,” US temporaliencies “in the business of replacement” go fast. Yet, while there are helpful dichotomies drawn between temporal speeds, it would be a mistake to valorize time in ways that make fast time necessarily bad and slow time good. Rather, the question should be: what benefits and dangers do various speeds introduce? William Connolly raises this question when discussing political existence.24 Connolly concedes that politics “takes time,” as Wolin argues, and recognizes that global capitalism contracts time, as Paul Virilio does; yet he proposes speed as torsion and continuity: “Thinking, culture, identity, and ethics are stratified processes, involving relays and feedback loops between layers of being operating at different capacities and speeds.”25 Connolly resists the tendency to romanticize slow time as cover for evading uncertainty, contestation, and change. The question is how to foster these goods within every pace. Rather than focusing on slow or fast time, Connolly asks how one measures speed. Time as looping, stratifying, layering, and relaying can simultaneously speed up and slow down based on perspective and position. Reference requires constant dissonance if it is to pace life rather than death. For the engineers of the domino theory, the US military could not deploy fast enough; for many Americans, it happened all too fast. Rather than supplant fast time with slow time, or speed time up, Connolly counsels laying different speeds side by side, paralleling and
intersecting so as to illuminate one via the other and to mutually inform, challenge, and overcome contrasting velocities. The goal, in this vein, is not to upend linear American fast time with, say, cyclical Vietnamean ancestral time, but rather to raise alternatives and thus highlight the reality that many times and speeds remain viable possibilities for life, without which fast or slow are but spites, a dialectical polarity that mutually robs life. In other words, speed is relative to perspective, since perception regulates temporal measure. In this way, fast and slow time can occur simultaneously. What for some seems fast might be excruciatingly slow for others, and vice versa. More importantly, fast and slow time rely on one another as frames of judgment. Fast time requires the formations of slow time—what Connolly calls “the workers rule speed can play in vesting doxastic identities”—to do its good work, and slow time must be driven by fast time’s animating powers. The question regarding the Vietnam War is, how did the quickened temporality of the Domino theory pace life on the ground toward atrocity? How was the boredom that O’Brien portrays constitutive of intermingling temporarities, the complex product of a tempo both too fast and too slow for many infantry soldiers to negotiate? DEROS unfulfills in 31,536,000 ordinary moments. Yet DEROS’s promised salvation made those 31,536,000 moments extraordinary. Without any guiding narrative other than escape, DEROS unravelled into what one soldier described as “just one stupid fucking thing after another,” so the extent that it became increasingly difficult to differentiate un/just acts of war, necessary from entertainment. Within this logic, the abstractions of fast time subvert an inherent slow time, while slow time finds shape in a fast world. No political leader or military commander would openly condone the many war crimes committed during the Vietnam War; they could not even acknowledge the war’s atrocious form. Yet undoubtedly, they needed on-the-ground soldiers to actualize their many machinations. If certain excesses occurred within this larger mission, so be it. The eventual details could be worked into victory’s larger narrative.

While the US has always rationalized its war crimes as aberrations, the atrocities committed in Vietnam were only part of a much larger pattern of collusive behavior fostered by US foreign policy during the Cold War. As it wrapped up operations in Vietnam, the US was already installing “death squads in Central America, which would unleash similar acts of terror under the catchall of staying off communism.”

In Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s Dialectics of Enlightenment, the authors characterize Nazi atrocities as a “ritual of civilization,” resplendent in a world “which in reality cannot exist without disfiguring human beings.” Violence and the like need no explanation other than a considered analysis of world spirit, which everywhere haunts the biopolitical economy. These are not, finally, alien eventualities, which dialectically confound familiarity. Rather, they are ours through and through. The fast time of the empty shell called the domino theory unfolds slowly through US war crimes on the ground. Both speeds are necessary for those Horkheimer and Adorno call “restorers of the earth,” who demonize an enemy “branded as absolute evil by absolute evil.” The pronounced (and convenient) distance between policy pundits, who order violence, and grunts, who commit atrocity, is not so great. As Horkheimer and Adorno brazenly put it: “The respectable rackets condone it, the respectable ones carry it out.”

Perhaps the primary difference between the terrors of Vietnam and those besetting us in the age of Al Qaeda and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) is a new openness, which no longer requires hiding under the cover of “half-understood ideology.” Somehow the non-secretive use of torture at the beginning of the twenty-first century, like the secret carpet-bombing of civilian populations in the 1960s, has become a morally feasible option for democracies like the US. Estranged from the self-giving God, the US, like all fallen creation, is doomed to a purely immanent temporality, which, in its fast and slow varieties, renders aberrant violence not only morally feasible but also, indeed, coherently responsible: “All living things become material for their ghastly duty, which now flinches at nothing. Action becomes a purpose in itself, cloaking its own purposelessness.”

TIME AND THE ORDINARY

Thomas Aquinas’s doctrine of divine eternity lays the foundation for his, and much of Western Christianity’s, central doctrines. Aquinas draws his understanding of divine eternity through the western tradition, most directly through Boethius, who followed Augustine’s theological appropriation of Middle-Platonism. Discussing divine eternity as part of God’s immutability (the idea of eternity follows immutability), Aquinas holds that God, as “pure act, without the admixture of potentiality,” neither changes, nor can be changed. God remains changeless while able to change all things. For Aquinas, immutability—along with simplicity, perfection, infinity, and unity—is part of the five divine essences. This,
within the structure of the First Part of the Summa, is how God exists. Aquinas follows Boethius’s argument that eternity is constituted by life, which both exists without limit and occurs “all at once.” Temporal life, as Augustine showed in the concluding chapters of the Confessions, is a “durationless instant,” which at all times encroaches upon itself. The present rolls the past of being, and the being of the present surrenders to the becoming of the future. The temporal soul in this sense, as demonstrated by Augustine, can be understood as “dissolved” because it exists in time continuously tossed to and fro by the ravages of time’s coming and going; not so with eternity. Eternity in contradistinction to time—“the measure of movement”—is determined by duration—“permanent being.” It endures (durat ultra quantusque ascendit). Indeed, the seeming equanimity of duration—of surviving time—prompted the ancients to begin to imagine eternity as a requirement of Being. Plotinus says of eternity, “The life, then, which belongs to that which exists and is in being, all together and full, completely without-extension-or-interval, is what we are looking for, eternity.” By the time Aquinas presents his reiteration—that is, as eternity had become a fundamental constituent of God being God—eternity had come to designate life without limit, which, extant all at once, lacks succession.

However, this is not to say that eternity is timeless. God is timeless in that whatever time is, time occurs to God. The life that is God’s eternity, as eternal, abides amidst time as its all-at-once-simultaneity, according to Eleonore Stump’s recent reading. It is exactly this simultaneity that names temporal existence as ordinary in the creaturely sense. In relation to the eternal, time is seen as changing, and existence in time ensues relative to time’s continuous change. Rather than eternity denoting a transcendent space beyond the flux of time, such that ascending the eternal achieves a type of pure gaze, eternity relativizes all such pretensions while allocating time productive of genuine difference. According to Aquinas, God as eternal is present to each moment of time, and as such can bequest goodness on the ordinateness of time, as something declared “good.” The self in time then names not a timeless sovereign subject but a creature coming to be as creature, a condition which when understood in light of the eternal becomes the occasion for alterity and the self’s inexhaustible contingency. The creature at all times remains as it and in time (she is not eternal). Such temporality does not cease but rather sacramentally references the eternal and hence her existence as gift. As Catherine Pickstock puts it, “...there are no such pre-established given, for everything is a never-finished work, which yet discloses what lies inevitably within the interstices of time.”

God’s timelessness (in terms of what Stump refers to as God’s eternal simultaneity) provides the basis for any coherent claim of God’s relations with temporal creatures. Only within the grammar of a doctrinal commitment to eternal simultaneity could one meaningfully speak about God’s relation with ordinary creation. As the eternal God present to time, eternally simultaneous with time, God has relations with temporal creatures. As present to time, God is present to the past, present to time’s present, and present to the future. This naturally follows Augustine’s claim that God’s eternity enforces God’s presentness to each moment in time; that eternity means time comes to God as the present of the past, the present of the present, and the present of the future. Because God endures without succession all at once, all things are present to God all at once. God lives in the world of the ordinary. Without this account of God’s being present to the past, present, and future, one could make little sense of God’s dealing with creatures who, as temporal, can only exist in the past, present, and future. In this way, Christianity transforms the Plotinian account of eternity and its Gnostic tendencies by avoiding time and eternity’s self-reductions.

Present to, in, and ultimately as the ordinary, God relates to creatures in part by mediating creaturely relations. God becomes the condition of possibility for temporal knowing and being. Catherine Pickstock’s reading of Aquinas’s De Veritate suggests that God knows particulars more directly than can material creatures, who know only analogically. Pickstock writes, “God is much more of a country bumpkin capable of a brutal direct unreflective intuition of clodish earth, blearied and smeared with soil. For God’s mind, although immaterial, is mysteriously commensurate with matter, since God creates matter. And because he [sic] makes matter, so also he knows it.” Precisely because God is eternal and therefore contemporaneous—eternally simultaneous—with time, God directly engages temporal things.

In contrast, temporal beings know things mediated through God’s knowing and, conversely, know God through things. Divine eternality does not divorce God from the temporal, and therefore temporal creatures, but rather locates God amidst the temporal more concretely than materiality qua materiality. God places God’s self in the midst of things. God’s activity can be traced in the play of the ordinary. Thus, Pickstock
asserts, "Those very things which might seem to distance our knowledge from that of God—such as its temporal nature, diversity, and material relationships—in fact draw us nearer still.\" By participating in God’s knowing do creatures know concretely. In the same way, creatures enjoy the ordinary by sacramentally enjoying God in the ordinary.

Creatures exist in time only by knowing God in time: “whilst God knows material things precisely because he [sic] is timeless outside them and brings them to be from nothing, Aquinas stresses that our very timeliness is what draws us close to God’s manner of knowing concrete things.\" God’s meditation in time then allows not only divine but also creaturely disclosure. Only through God do creatures finally participate in the fullness of temporal being. With John Milbank and Pickstock shows how God, fully encamped in the ordinariness of the elements, locates depth not beyond but in time such that time evokes a cascading unveiling of the world: "The provocations of desire reveal that the truth to be known is never exhausted, but is characterized by a promise of always more to come.\" This is not because creation lacks ontological relational, but because God makes God’s self-simultaneous with creaturely life through an abiding maieutic (midwifery), an extant "transcendent plenitude" made possible “because God is so utterly ripe and self-sufficient that he [sic] can share without shadow of jealousy,” allowing Milbank and Pickstock to boldly claim that "there can be a created exterior to God, because God’s interior is self-exertionization.\" Thus, God becomes the correlate not only for knowledge of God but also for knowledge of anything.

Aquinas’s analogical materialism affirms the temporal as the correlate for knowledge of God and knowledge of things, thereby situating God’s life with creation without jeopardizing its integrity—in fact, maximally upholding it. This not only affirms creaturely life, but God’s ordering of creatively life also avouches time as the locale of the life of virtue, while resisting holding it as possession. Unable to imagine the mundane as more than dull, the ordinary must be made to entertain. In this way, boredom indicates that something has already gone wrong.

Signifying potentiality and actuality, desire denotes temporality. According to critical theorist Judith Butler:

In order for desire to gain determinate reality, it must continually pursue an indefinable domain of alterity; the reflexive experience of desire is only possible in and through the experience of desirable things. The condition drawn by self-consciousness that the world of objects is not consumable in its entirety has an unexpected inverse conclusion: desire requires this endless proliferation of alterity in order to stay alive as desire, as a desire that not only wants life but is living. If the domain of living things could be consumed, desire would, paradoxically, lose its life.\" Cultivating the goods of time then requires careful attention to time as a field of consummated possibility. Ordinary time orders activity to ends commensurate with time as created. As creatively being actualizes itself by participating in God, so time is never more timelike than when it tends the eternal.\" This good use of slow time foretells itself in boredom. Good uses of slow time can be found in the evenness of liturgical calendars, the regularity of scripture and confession, the long haul commitment to gathering and sending, the waiting of prayer, the long-suffering of listening, the patience of friendship, and the discipline of joy. In this good slow time, God nurtures the virtues. Paul calls these virtues the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23).

War vitiates these virtues when it replaces desire with boredom. Before atrocity sets in, love must have already given way to indulgence, joy to disappointment, peace to wrath, patience to desperation, gentleness to callousness, goodness to evil, faith to cynicism, meekness to aggression, and self-control to violence. When one no longer desires the one replete in atrocity, in creation, the unhurried and watchful discovery of a life becomes suddenly boring. Now, time must procure its own satisfaction. Yet since only the eternal satisfies time, it betrays itself. Uninterested in its end and detached from that which gives it meaning, time thrashes about. It hastens empty desires at breakneck velocity but goes nowhere and achieves nothing. It manifest the will to prefer the identical repetition of emptiness of rule for no purpose, but rather for its own sake, over submission to the natural superiority of the infinite which must be perceived in ever-renewing, non-identical repetition.\" John Milbank’s language here of preference is critical because privation intimates desire, but desire for its own sake. Rather than desiring the eternal (what Milbank calls "submission to the natural superiority of the infinite"), time prefers itself, as if survival—the infinite return (DEROS) of time to itself—were the point. When one holds the self, the end of all of creaturely existence, one cannot help but find the ordinary extraordinary boring. The subtitle “A True Story of Men and War” of Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss’s atrocity history Tiger Force implies that atrocity can be
explained by the unfortunate confluence of realities produced by war. In one particular incident, Salah and Weiss tell the story of Kieu Trak, who watches as the decorated American “Tiger Force” unit murders his father. Because of the delicate harvesting process and the villagers’ desperate need for food, Kieu’s father, Kieu Cong, passes on his son’s plans to flee the Americans. Successful rice production, upon which the whole of the Vietnamese diet depends, puts to work generations of subtle and skillful training in order to carefully negotiate a complicated matrix of seed, climate, water, seasons, humidity, sunlight, planting, harvesting, and so on. What were for Americans colorful grids ripe for carpet-bombing represented a basic yet fragile relationship between the Vietnamese and the earth. To the context of the extreme destitution created by generations of foreign colonization and war, rice often comprised not only the staple but the entirety of the village meal. There was often nothing else to eat. While rice depended on the Vietnamese, the Vietnamese equally depended on rice—the most ordinary of crops. The whole life of the village revolved around it. (So completely symbiotic was the relationship that Vietnamese villagers often used human feces to fertilize their rice paddies.)

A respected leader and expert harvester, the other villagers trusted Kieu Cong implicitly and followed him even when the dangerous American GIs, patrolled frighteningly nearby. Kieu Cong, a devout and regular worshipper at the local Buddhist pagoda, simply believed the Americans were like all people, good, and trusted that if push came to shove, they would leave the civilian farmers alone. And so he pressed on, realizing the delicate timing of the season and the importance of this particular harvest for the survival of the village. After several hours of work, Kieu Trak implored his father to abandon the rice because he knew too much exposure, but his father chose to continue harvesting lest the crop fail.

Kieu Cong directed his son to keep watch at the perimeter of the field, against the edge of the foothills. As Kieu Trak watched and waited, to his horror, a US helicopter approached. He started to run to his father, but Kieu Cong waved him off, ordering him to remain hidden from view. His father could not hide with Kieu Trak without giving away Trak’s position. After identifying the farmers as elderly men and women, the elite unit opened fire, which was joined eventually by the helicopter’s large-caliber automatic machine guns. Kieu Trak watched as soldiers massacred his father and other villagers. To survive, he had to bury his head in his hands so that no one could hear him cry. Later, as Kieu Trak and his wife carefully prepared their father’s body for burial, they were joined by others torn between wanting to weep aloud and stay alive. The rice field filled with muffled cries.

NOTES


3. See Henry Swan, After the Massacre: Communication & Conflation in The My Lai & My Lai (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2006). Regarding the many forgotten atrocities of the war, few today remember the war crimes committed by South Korean soldiers during the war. Indeed, most do not even know that South Korea sent 300,000 soldiers to Vietnam or that America’s payments for those soldiers led to the economic revitalization that has hitherto propelled the hugely successful South Korean postwar economy. See also Charles K. Armstrong, “America’s Korea, Korea’s Vietnam,” Critical Asian Studies (Reutledge) 43, no. 4 (December 2001): 527-539.

4. The South Korean government has often fought against the public disclosure of these events. On the one hand, their ongoing grievances with Japan over war crimes require the presentation of facts. On the other hand, South Korea has recently become one of Vietnam’s most important trading partners. The desire to keep these atrocities behind exists what Charles Armstrong calls a “doubly forgotten event,” where forgetting needs to be continuously reordered.

5. Henry reported the incidents, along with others, in an official report to the US military’s Criminal Investigations Division (CID), dated February 28, 1970.


7. Arnold R. Isaac, Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Secret, its Legacy (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University, 1997), 22-23. Arnold Isaac observes, “Just as the burden of national failure was largely displaced from the national leadership onto the soldiers, so was the burden of guilt; uniformly nothing came of the way of escaping a responsibility that properly belonged to America’s leadership and to American society as a whole. The movies that made a cliché of atrocities drove another wedge between the country and its soldiers.”

largely unsuccessful prosecution of the My Lai Massacre, Michael Bernardi
reflected on the US military's response to the war crime: "I had hoped the
army would come out of this with a sense of purpose, knowing why and
what we are doing. That a change in culture would begin where we started
rewarding officers who acted out of responsibility instead of carelessness.
But they studied this particular group of soldiers like they lived in a vacuum.
They never found out the why part." (347). Marilyn McCord Adams,
_Homo Sapiens and the Goodness of God_ (Athens, NY: Cornell University,
1999). In _Homo Sapiens and the Goodness of God_, Marilyn McCord Adams
suggests that what has become in recent years philosophical problems
regarding evil presses theological questions and concludes that while come-
ing to terms with evil—Bernhardt's "why"—one may begin with challenges
to the US military's scope leadership (as Bernardi hoped); or with unadul-
terated clarity about divine omnipotence (as philosophers like J.J. Mackie hoped),
but confessional theology must be engaged if we hope to work through hor-
or like My Lai. This is not to say that theology provides answers to what
are finally impossible questions (exactly because these are not questions but
raged, terrorized, and murdered persons), but that whatever Christian theo-
ology is, it begins and ends in places like My Lai.

8. John Milbank, _Being Recognized: Ontology & Paradigm_ (London: Routledge,
2003), 3.

9. Tim O'Brien, _The Things They Carried_ (New York, NY: Broadway Books,
1990), 34.

Norton & Company, 1979), 41, and Tim O'Brien, _In the Lake of the Woods_
account offers a riveting fictional depiction of My Lai's long shadow of
moral failure.

11. Michael Bilton & Kevin Sim, _Four Hearts in My Lai_ (New York, NY:
Viking, 1992), 116, 113, 120, 124, 129, and 130-131. Appreciation to Brandon
Morgan for engaging this research.

12. Sally Wernick, _We Are at War: American Narratives of the Vietnam

See "The Time of the Political" in the same online issue http://www.
journals.berkeley.edu/tnes/issue1/issue1.html My distinctions here
regarding slow and fast times can be constructed along with Wendy Brown's "a time of events" contrasted to "the time of The Events."

14. William E. Connolly, _Neonotics: Thinking, Culture, Spat_ (Minneapolis,
MN: University of Minnesota, 2002).

15. Ibid., 159. Connolly describes his larger project both in contrast to and in
continuity with Wolin: "The question for me, then, is not how to slow
down, but how to work with and against a world moving faster than herefore
to promote a positive ethos of pluralization" (160). Paul Virilio, _Spast_ 

16. See Richard Smith, _The Brain Is the Milieu: Speed, Politics & the
burnsandarch.com/tnes/issue7/issue7.html

17. Connolly, 195 (emphasis original).

18. Jonathan Shay, _Authiles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma & the Undoing of
acts of war, contemporary just war reasoning harbors a paradox that may
be too obvious to elicit much analysis. If just cause requires sacrifices to
stave off greater evils, then how can one delineate in hellish stipulations?
In other words, if _ad bellum_ circumstances require and justify war, do
not those circumstances override all other considerations? Just war proponents
say no, arguing that in war, moral decorum must be maintained if the war
is to remain just; that unjust fighting disqualifies just cause. Yet the _ad bellum_
rationale of imminent sacrifice intimates a disconnect between _ad bellum_ and _in
bellum_ considerations precisely because the very claim of necessity renders
exacting _in bellum_ criteria rather arbitrary. For an example, see Bao Nghia,
_Rover of War: A Novel of North Vietnam_ , trans. Phan Thanh Hao
(New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1995). In Bao Nghia's war novel, a
female indianny scout sacrifices her body to a brutal gang rape in order to
buy time for comrades to escape certain death. Is sacrificing one's body to
rape interval to the larger sacrifice that war claims to be? If not, why not?
Bao's story raises just war's implicit paradox because in this case, what is
sacrificed is not a man's life but a woman's body, which traditional just war
thinking, for obvious reasons, does not anticipate. Thus, the question arises:
_which sacrifices cost? _For this woman, sacrifices were necessary in this
specific situation and for the general cause of the war itself. Can we say
that women soldiers submitting their bodies to gang rape is part of the just
war paradigm? If not, how can we distinguish between that and a man
_giving his body to machine gun slaughter? Does not just war reasoning claim
that what needs to be sacrificed first are one's moral distinctions toward
certain kinds of acts, such as killing? If so, which acts count, and if imma-
nent necessity runs the show, how do we do the counting? (Bao, 185-193).
Perhaps Bao's narrator articulates the best the just war tradition can hope for:
_"To win, martyrs had sacrificed their lives in order that others might
survive. Not a new phenomenon, true, but for those still living to know
that the kindred, most worthy people have all fallen away, or even been
beaten, humiliated before being killed, or buried and wiped away by the
machine of war, that this beautiful landscape of calm and peace is an
appealing paradox. Justice may have won, but creativity, death, and inhuman
violence have also won"_ (ibid., 194).


21. Ibid., 137.
22. Ibid., 139.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 140.
26. ST Ia.10.4. Having already discussed divine immutability, Aquinas can say in the first article regarding eternity, "... time...is nothing else but the measure of before and after in movement. Now a thing benefit of movement, which is always the same, there is no before or after. As therefore the idea of time consists in the numbering of before and after in movement; so likewise in the apprehension of unifiucty of what is outside of movement, consists the idea of eternity." (ST Ia.9.1). However, this is critical for both Thomas specifically and Christian theology generally, time does "take place" in God in the sense that creation "takes place" in God. Time of course God's accommodation for creation within the space that is God's eternal life. As such, all that occurs in time occurs in God. In this way, Aquinas's conception of divine eternality relies upon his fundamental claim of divine simplicity (i.e., that there is nothing exterior, no outside, to God as there are no parts to God not participant within God's life). As stand, in the Summa, Aquinas discusses divine eternity in relationship to divine immutability, not divine simplicity; though both, along with divine perfection, infinity, and unity, are part of "The Divine Essence."

27. Summa 3 iv 7.


32. Ibid., 71.
33. Ibid., 72.
35. Ibid., 93, 85, 86.


37. Ibid., 106.
38. Milbank, 8.
39. Michael Sallah & Mirch Weis, Tiger Force: A True Story of Men & War (New York, NY: Little, Brown, & Company, 2006). Similarly, Philip Caputo's A Rumor of War casts war crimes as "the things men do in war and the things war does to them." Philip Caputo, A Rumor of War (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1977). Sallah and Weis's Tiger Force chronicles a seven-month period in the Song Ve Valley, during which an elite US unit under the mandate "kill anything that moves" murdered hundreds of civilians (exactly 457 because they were the 247th Infantry). A massacre that culminated in the decapitation of a Vietnamese baby (Sallah & Weis, 108, 209). Women of the Pulitzer Prize for their initial reporting of a story that took four decades to surface, Sallah and Weis gave unflinching details of crimes that only become imaginable, as they and Caputo suggest, within the larger terms of war. But their conceptualization of events—"these things happen in war"—offers too much and too little: too much because clearly not all, or even many, soldiers commit atrocities in wartime, and too little in that war crimes speak to deeper horrors than war, of which war is but one expression.

40. Sallah & Weis, 118-125.
41. This chapter is adapted and updated with permission from Jonathan Tran, The Vietnam War & Theology of Memory Time & Eternity in the Far Country (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).