

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**LAURIE JOHNSTON** is an associate professor of theology at Emmanuel College, where she also serves as Director of Fellowships. Johnston spoke with the Boisi Center program coordinator **Suzanne Hevelone** and undergraduate research assistant **Nathan McGuire** before her presentation on just war theory and the environmental impact of modern warfare.

**HEVELONE:** The subtitle of your talk at the Boisi Center is from Deuteronomy 20:19: “Are trees in the field human beings, that they should come under siege from you?” At first you actually wanted this to be the title. What about this verse speaks to you about war and the environment?

**JOHNSTON:** I love this verse because it speaks to the sort of basic human acknowledgment that there’s something wrong about the killing of human beings, and the verse then invites us to apply that to trees – to the natural environment. Both of those things I think are important.

The other piece I like about it is that it shows that this consideration of what is the environmental impact of war is an ancient question. It’s not so much that this is a new issue, as that the scale is different now, like with so many other issues connected to war. The basic human problem of disrespect for the environment is ancient and still needs addressing. These issues are interconnected. Our attitudes towards killing human beings and our attitudes towards destroying the natural environment bear some relation to each other.

**MCGUIRE:** How did you become interested in war and its effects on the environment?

**JOHNSTON:** I’ve been interested in the ethics of war for a long time and just war theory as an approach to thinking about how to limit war and how to make war more ethical. There’s a strong connection between climate change, environmental



devastation and warfare. More and more wars are being driven by environmental destruction, by climate change and by resource scarcity. The interconnections between the damage that’s done to the environment and the damage that’s done by war have been increasingly coming to everyone’s attention.

At the same time, when we talk about how to limit climate change and how

to address environmental problems, most of the conversation is about more ordinary activities of life. How can we – in our families, in our schools and in our businesses – reduce our carbon footprint? There’s not as much conversation about war or the military and how the carbon impact of those activities can be addressed, and the carbon impact of war is tremendous. Even in the Kyoto Protocols in 1997, when countries agreed to track their emissions and pledged to reduce their emissions, there was an automatic exception for all militaries. Their emissions were not tracked. They weren’t seen as needing to be reduced. It was an automatic exception.

That changed with the Paris Climate Change talks in December, 2015. For the first time, because of the agreements there, there’s no longer an automatic exception for military activities. However, countries can still opt to not consider their militaries in calculating their climate impact or calculating their reductions. I’m interested to see what the U.S. military is going to do. At this point in time, we don’t even really know the impact of the U.S. military on the environment. We don’t know what its carbon footprint is. There is nobody calculating that in a holistic way.

We’re just beginning to move away from this idea of military activity as some-

thing exceptional that doesn't need to be considered when we think about climate change. Now it's becoming clear that climate change aggravates war, and war is contributing to climate issues. They're deeply interconnected, and we have to think about the intersection.

**MCGUIRE:** How has modern warfare increased the potential for far-reaching environmental devastation?

**JOHNSTON:** Some of it is just the advances in weaponry, of course. We're capable of more intense, widespread destruction because of advances in technology. Nuclear weapons are an obvious example. Another is that the U.S. sprayed about 10% of the land area of Vietnam with Agent Orange and only began cleaning that up in 2012. It's still causing birth defects and major issues in Vietnam. Chemicals like Agent Orange, weapons like nuclear weapons, and, more recently, drone warfare can increase environmental devastation. Drones are a challenging topic. In one sense they have less of a carbon footprint because they are less resource-intensive. They use less fuel than manned aircraft. At the same time, they extend the reach of the military, so that basically we can cause destruction in more far-flung places.

Then the other aspect of contemporary military technology is something that Pope Francis alludes to in *Laudato Si* about technology in general. With increases in technology, we become more and more disconnected – from one another, but also from the natural world. There's a temptation to remove ourselves. For instance, in drone warfare, that's obvious because the drone operators are operating them often by remote control from a long distance. But there are many other ways in which so many of the people who are making decisions about warfare are not in touch with the environmental consequences of what they're doing. They're not farmers. That's true of many of us. We're disconnected from nature because of technology in all

kinds of ways. The effects on warfare are just one aspect of that.

**HEVELONE:** Could you explain the concept of proportionality and the understanding of just war? How does the environment figure into the concept of proportionality?

**JOHNSTON:** Just war theory is a tradition that goes back many centuries to thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas. It seeks to balance Jesus' commandments that we should love our enemies and we

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should love our neighbors. Those two commandments are challenging because they sometimes conflict, if our enemies are attacking our neighbors. How do we balance them? How do we love our neighbor by defending the innocent, and at the same time love our enemies as much as possible? Just war theory is a set of criteria that's developed to try to evaluate when the duty to protect our neighbors might justify using violence against someone who is attacking them.

There is a whole set of criteria that has developed over the years for assessing whether or not a war is justified in certain circumstances. Just cause is the most basic one. Is this a war that's being

fought in order to defend the innocent or to redress an injustice? Or is it being fought for a reason like extending one's own territory? That would not constitute just cause.

There are other criteria, but proportionality is the criterion that's most core to just war theory and distinguishes just war theory from both pacifism and realism. What pacifism and realism have in common is that they both don't consider costs. For a pacifist, war is wrong no matter what the costs or the consequences. For a realist, if a war serves national interest, then you should carry it out regardless of the cost to civilian lives.

Just war theory is different because it says you have to weigh the costs. That's where proportionality comes in. Proportionality is the criterion that asks, “Would a war in this circumstance do more good than harm?” That is a question asked about the war as a whole before going to war – so it's part of *jus ad bellum*. It's also a question that has to be asked at each step in a war, so it's also part of the *jus in bello*, the questions about justice during war. Would each particular tactic that's being considered produce enough benefit to the stated objective of the just war that it would outweigh whatever harm would be done? For instance, if you learn that there's a small weapons cache in the midst of a highly populated area, you don't go and drop an enormous bomb to eliminate it. The damage that would be produced in this civilian area would outweigh whatever military objective you would hope to accomplish.

Proportionality is important for the environmental consequences of war, because anything you do in war is going to have consequences for the environment. In some ways, any human activity has consequences for the environment. This is not just a criterion that applies in war. When we decide whether to drive our car versus walk, we're weighing the proportionality of the pollution that we'll produce versus the benefit that we expect to receive in terms of convenience. Similarly

in warfare, you have to think about the cost to the environment and weigh those costs against whatever justice is involved in pursuing a war in a particular context.

**MCGUIRE:** How do we, as citizens who don't have access to the kind of information that officials have, assess when it's just and when it's necessary for the government to be taking certain actions?

**JOHNSTON:** According to the just war tradition, war has to be declared by somebody who has legitimate authority. Anyone who's evaluating the justness of a war has to have authority, because they need access to accurate information. As ordinary citizens, we might not have the expertise to really understand or calculate the environmental impact of anything in particular.

On the other hand, there are some obvious things that we can assess as ordinary citizens. We need to grasp the scale. For instance, the Blue Angels, which are a big hit at many military air shows, release about 750,000 pounds of carbon into the environment during a single air show. For comparison, your average car releases about 8000 pounds a year.

It doesn't take environmental expertise to think about the scale of any military operation, and therefore to have a pretty significant amount of caution in thinking about the environmental impact of any military endeavor. It should give us pause when we start to understand just the scale of the impact.

More broadly, when people talk about proportionality of war, it can't just be a mathematical calculation. It can't just come down to numbers. Actually what it comes down to is valuing things beyond just the numbers. Part of the challenge in figuring out whether or not any war is proportional is – who's doing the valuing? What is it that we regard as disproportionate? That has to do with who we are and how we assess reality on a deeper level.

We need to cultivate a sense in the population as a whole of caution and sensitiv-



ity about environmental damage, rather than callousness. That's an attitude that extends to all areas of life – it shapes our culture and our policymakers.

**MCGUIRE:** Based on Catholic teaching, how should Catholics view the environment's intrinsic value compared to the value of human life?

**JOHNSTON:** There's a long-standing debate in environmental ethics about whether we should approach the environment as having intrinsic value or just instrumental value. To some extent, that's a false dichotomy, especially from a Catholic perspective. It presumes that we're not part of the environment, but we are.

What *Laudato Si* effectively shows that everything is interconnected. You can't talk about the environment's intrinsic value without talking about its instrumental value as well. It's valuable to us because we are part of it and because we are dependent upon it – and it's also dependent on us. Any kind of separation between what's good for the environment and what's good for humanity is to some extent false. There's a great line in *Laudato Si* that the human environment and the natural environment degrade together. That's certainly true in many contexts.

That said, there are times in which preserving human life and preserving

the environment are going to conflict. For instance, there are times when war can be good for the environment, oddly enough, by removing humans from an area. For instance, the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea is a hot-spot of biodiversity because it's a no-go zone. Obviously, it's not a wonderful nature preserve, because there are also land mines all over the place and land mines occasionally blow up animals, but it does illustrate that things that are bad for humans might be good for the rest of the nonhuman environment.

There are other examples of this too. For example, in some wars in Africa, there have been militia groups that have used nature preserves to hide out. It's lovely that there's a nature preserve, but if it's providing cover for militia groups that are then doing lots of destruction, that's a problematic situation.

Far more often, however, what's bad for the human population is also bad for the environment and vice versa. Far more often, what you see are things like a war causing a refugee flow, which is obviously bad for humans. The refugee flow then leads to deforestation in an area, because the refugees need wood. Human damage and environmental damage go hand in hand. That's far more typical.

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