Conflict Presentation to AAAPCC on May 19th, 2012

Introduction: the seeds of conflict in Christian theology

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you. I do so with some temerity. The subject of "Working with Conflict as Pastoral Care Advisers" is fraught with – well – conflict. It is not just that different people hold different positions on a number of key issues, but that there is no neutral vantage point from which the nature of their positions and the conflicts between them may be described. We all view these issues from the bias of our own standpoint, and I am no exception. So, I will begin by saying a little about my own perspective. I speak to you from the edge of the Church, as a priest who has given up stipendiary ministry in large part because of the failure of the Church of England and the Church of Ireland, in which I also served, to address adequately, let alone resolve, the many conflicts that afflict them. I earn my living now as a systemic family therapist, in which role I have learned a great deal about conflict between individuals and groups and in couples and families, much of which seems relevant to conflict within the Church.

One of my most formative experiences was the five years I spent endeavouring to teach pastoral and practical theology at the Church of Ireland Theological College in Dublin. Unlike residential colleges in the Church of England, it is the only place where ordination candidates are allowed to train for ministry in the Church of Ireland, which covers the whole of Ireland. This means that students from the full range of theological and political positions within the Church of Ireland have to study together. My classes, therefore, contained Creationists alongside those who accepted the historical critical study of the Bible, Conservative Evangelicals alongside Affirming Catholics, and Nationalist Southerners

alongside Unionist Northerners, some of whom were members of the Orange Order or had been in the security forces. My time in the college coincided with the protests at Drumcree which, you may recall, is a church near Portadown at which the rerouting of a traditional Orange march to avoid Catholic areas led to violent protests by the Orangemen. I learnt a great deal about how theology and church affiliation are interrelated with social, political and personal issues, and had to find ways of engaging my students in educational group exercises, including theological reflection on pastoral placements, which can only take place constructively if the group can be made a safe enough place for at least some vulnerability to be risked by the participants.

Much inter and intra-church conflict is about possession of the right to interpret the religious tradition combined with the idea that there is only one or a limited number of acceptable ways of interpreting it. These interpretations are, however, not purely theological or intellectual; they also carry considerable psychological and emotional significance for those who believe in them, both for individuals and groups, and very often also social, political and economic significance as well. The interaction between the theological arguments or justifications, and the emotional and other investments that they carry, results in considerable difficulty for anyone who tries to have a meaningful debate about these different positions. Very often what is being explicitly talked about is very far from what the most important issues are for the participants. Anyone seeking to mediate in a conflict or to engage another who is acting in an oppositional way needs to understand what the underlying motivations are beneath the apparent subject matter of debate, or the debate will get nowhere. Unless we identify the *non-theological* sources of conflict we will have no possibility of making sense of present day

theological conflicts within the Church of England. Much of the time debates in the Church of England fail to advance because these other issues are not acknowledged or are too contentious to be resolved if they are. I want to spend the first part of this talk looking at what some of those emotional and other investments are and how they are interconnected with particular theological positions. After that, I will outline some practical considerations in engaging with conflict in the church.

Monotheism and violence

If we are to understand such conflict we need to start by giving up the idea that it is somehow an aberration from the peaceful community the church is supposed to be. Conflict, it seems to me, is built into the theological foundations of monotheism and is especially associated with the existence of a covenant between God and the Hebrew people, a covenant which the Christian Church has reapplied to itself. My awareness of this association has been particularly influenced by a book, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Schwartz, 1997) by Regina M. Schwartz, who makes the strong claim 'that through the dissemination of the Bible in Western culture, its narratives have become the foundation of a prevailing understanding of ethnic, religious and national identity as defined negatively, over and against others. We are "us" because we are not "them." Israel is not-Egypt' (Schwartz, 1997, p. x). This kind of thinking is widespread amongst monotheists; it was certainly highly prevalent in Ireland, where it was necessary to be categorised as either Catholic or Protestant, identities defined against each other. According to Schwartz, the connection between this negative means of identity formation and violence lies in:

a principle of scarcity that pervades most thinking about identity. When everything is in short supply, it must all be competed for – land, prosperity, power, favor, even identity itself. In many biblical narratives, the one God is not imagined as infinitely giving, but as strangely withholding. Everyone does not receive divine blessings. Some are cursed – with dearth and with death – as though there were a cosmic shortage of prosperity… Scarcity is encoded in the Bible as a principle of Oneness (one land, one people, one nation) and in monotheistic thinking (one Deity), it becomes a demand of exclusive allegiance that threatens with the violence of exclusion. (Schwartz, 1997, p. xi)

Schwartz gives the story of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:3-16) as her paradigmatic instance of scarcity producing conflict through relationship to the one God. The most notable feature of the narrative of Cain and Abel is that when the two brothers approach God with their respective sacrifices, God accepts Abel's but rejects Cain's *without giving any reason* for his partiality. Commentators have often sought to account for and justify God's behaviour and have attributed various inadequacies to Cain's offering, but there is nothing explicit in the text to explain it. Naturally, Cain is furious and jealous of Abel, as any older son would be whose father had unaccountably shown a preference for his younger brother – so much so that he murders him. Although Cain is condemned by God to become an outcast for killing Abel, God cannot be absolved of responsibility for Abel's death. Schwartz comments:

What kind of God is this who chooses one sacrifice over the other? This God who excludes some and prefers others, who casts some out, is a monotheistic God – monotheistic not only because he

demands allegiance to himself alone but because he confers his favor on one alone… We are descendants of Cain because we too live in a world where some are cast out, a world in which whatever law of scarcity made that ancient story describe only one sacrifice as acceptable – a scarcity of goods, land, labor, or whatever – still prevails to dictate the terms of a ferocious and fatal competition. Some lose. (Schwartz, 1997, pp. 2-3)

The mysterious favouritism of the one God is pre-eminently found in the choice of the Hebrews to be his people and is a theme that recurs several times in the biblical narratives. It is absolutely central, for example, to the stories of Isaac and Ishmael and of Jacob and Esau, and there are many other examples of God's mysterious partiality in the Bible. In all cases it gives rise to a competition that issues in conflict if not always in physical violence,between those whom God prefers and those whom he ignores or rejects.

Such biblical stories continue to have profound effects on the emotional lives of contemporary Christians. Christians have many reasons for believing in God and belonging to a church, prominent amongst them are the desires to be loved, to be accepted, to be valued and to belong. Many are looking for a reassurance about themselves and their worth that they do not possess inwardly because of the vicissitudes of their upbringing. Many, whether consciously or not, want to be reassured that they are truly accepted by God. Emotional insecurity inevitably colours their experience of God, the Church and their fellow believers. Anxiety is a very common emotion amongst Christians; at an extreme this is a fear of damnation, more often it is one of not being good enough, or of not being acceptable to others in their congregations.

Stories such as that of Cain and Abel raise questions about the reliability of God and the conditions under which he accepts them. What do Christians need to do to win God's favour? How do they know they have got it right? And, could they lose out to someone else who might gain God's favour instead? The biblical stories are not reassuring because so often God's behaviour appears arbitrary or extreme. The nature of the covenant between God and Israel compounds this situation.

The Covenant and the religion of threat

The choice of Israel as God's people is associated with a covenant or agreement between God and Israel. Although the choice of the Jews has nothing to do with their superiority over others, originating entirely in God's mysterious will and graciousness, it is not unconditional; God gives them a Law and expects them to live according to its provisions. In the wilderness narratives there are frequent examples of God imposing draconian punishments on his people because they murmur about the conditions in the wilderness or infringe his Law in some way. This God is one who is quite prepared to massacre his people if they disobey. He even threatens to destroy them and create a new people for himself from the descendants of Moses.

Mosesmanages to persuade God not to act in this way, but he also makes clear to the Israelites that their possession of the land that God will give them is dependent upon their continued obedience to his Law. The threat of dispossession hangs over them even as they are preparing to enter and conquer the Promised Land. Scholars regard this narrative as justification *after the event* for the actual loss of the land, but that need not delay us here. What matters are the emotional implications of the covenant. It

gives rise to what I call *the religion of threat*: the imperative to obey God to avoid rejection or punishment by him.

In due time, the Christian Church claimed to have inherited the favour and promises of God to Israel, in other words, to have replaced them in the covenant relationship andto have become the new chosen people. This belief subsequently enabled various Christian ecclesiastical denominations and their associated political entities to identify themselves with the chosen people, to assert that they were the sole possessors of the authentic truth about the Christian faith and to lay claim to both specific territories, which they regarded as new 'Promised Lands', and social and economic privileges over the 'heathen' or 'heretical' indigenous peoples who inhabited those lands, for example, the Protestant settlers of North America and the Dutch settlers in South Africa.

However, the identification of the Church with Israel introduced the threat at the heart of the Jewish covenant into Christianity: if God could reject the Jews for their disobedience, he could also reject the Christians or, at least, particular subgroups of Christians if they did not keep their side of the 'new covenant'. This danger has encouraged many Christian leaders to act to keep their people 'pure' and thereby to avoid the judgement of God, resulting in puritanical regimes of one kind or another which have sought to control their communities' morals. These fears have also justified inquisitorial activities by both Catholic and Protestant rulers as well as the oppression of political non-conformists. Throughout much of its history the Christian Church has identified itself with a controlling God and subjected its deviant members and unbelievers to forms of restriction and violence which have emulated, and even exceeded, those used by the God of the Hebrews.

Some people think that the threatening aspects of the God of the Bible are restricted to the God of the Old Testament. However, this is not so. Traditional Christian doctrine is, if anything, even more threatening than that of the ancient Israelites. It contains astark dualism enshrined in the belief in a Day of Judgement at which the human race will be separated into two groups: one which will be saved and go to eternal bliss in Heaven, and the other which will be damned and experience an eternity of torture. This division creates deep-seated anxiety in believers, who may fear for their eternal fate, and this anxiety, in turn, interacts with a fundamental ambiguity in mainstream Christian teaching about the love of God, namely, that although the Church claims that God's love is unconditional, he only accepts those humans into Heaven who believe in Jesus Christ and have repented of their sins. The rest he damns. The "unconditional" love of God is actually hedged about by conditions and the threat of damnation for those who do not fulfil them. The acceptance of Christians by their fellow believers is likewise often conditional upon their adherence to particular standards of action or belief. These conditions interact with the emotional needs of the devout in many destructive ways. Many Christians look for an emotional fulfilment in their faith that they do not find elsewhere, but the cost of achieving it may be to fit themselves into a straightjacket of behaviour and conviction that considerably limits or distorts their personalities, and which may even result in neurotic symptoms.

Rather than being liberated from false restraints upon their lives, Christians frequently seem afraid of doing the "wrong" thing or expressing the "wrong" opinion. They may be excessively concerned about what others in their church or prayer group think about them, or

express anxiety about whether or not God really loves them. They may even, as I have said,worry about whether or not they are damned.

Revelation, violence and the spirituality of identification

The violence of God in the Bible and in Jewish, Christian and Islamic teaching gives rise not only to negative psychological responses in individual believers faced with the threat of punishment by God but also to unhealthy group reactions, in particular what I call *the spirituality of identification*. This often functions as a form of compensation for the insecurity associated with covenant theology for those who, at least unconsciously, do not feel good enough to be accepted by God. Groups may identify themselves with the favour of God, especially through identifying themselves with the Chosen People, and may seek to guarantee his continuing goodwill through an emphasis on moral purity, ethnic exclusiveness and intellectual conformity, advocating certain ethical and political behaviours and asserting certain beliefs. Individual members of such groups are then able to identify themselves with the favour of God through their membership of these groups and conformity to these practices.

Central to the spirituality of identification is the idea of revelation. Even though the monotheistic religions emphasise that God is very active in the world that we humans experience, they are very clear that God is not to be identified with either the Cosmos as a whole or any part of it, and they are strongly opposed to idolatry. But if nothing in the created world can be identified with God, the question arises how the deity can be known at all. The monotheistic religions solve this problem by using the idea of revelation: what humans cannot know through ordinary human perception has been made known *only*to certain individuals or

groups by the direct action of God. A claim that revelation has occurred is thus a claim that just a few particular observable events, such as the Exodus from Egypt or the death and resurrection of Jesus, or texts, such as the Bible or the Qu'ran, make the unseen knowable in a manner that is qualitatively different from any ideas about God that may be derived from human reflection alone or other kinds of experience. In this way a distinction is created *within the World* between the things of God and the things of the World, between sacred places and secular places, between the words of God and the words of humans, and between a chosen people and every other people, even though to an uninformed observer they all look the same. These distinctions are all examples of Schwartz's 'principle of scarcity'. This particularity also sets up a division between two different sources of knowledge – revelation, on the one hand, and ordinary human experience and reflection, on the other – this is the origin of the conflict between the Christian religion and science.

All too often religious communities make the claim that they alone possess, or know the true interpretation of, an inerrant revelation received from God. However it is expressed, monotheism, when associated with such an assertion of ownership of revelation, gives rise to a major problem for the peace of the world: there are many different forms of belief even within each of the monotheistic religions; to select one of these as the one and only truth about the one and only God requires the rejection of all the others. And since these belief systems are adhered to by specific communities, this cannot be done without producing a competition for the acknowledgement of their beliefs between those communities; one that is very often associated with competing exclusive claims to possession of territory or privilege on the basis of those

religious convictions. The outcome is very frequently inter-communal violence.

From the genocide of the Canaanites in the Hebrew Bible, through the persecutions, crusades and wars of religion that have marred Christian history, to the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the destruction of the World Trade Centre by Al Quaeda and the occupation of the West Bank by Israeli forces, the violent consequences of the identification of monotheistic religion with the ideological interests of the elect of God are apparent.

Religious belief and identity

My time in Ireland made me very aware of these dynamics. Their relevance to the conflicts over the political and cultural control of Northern Ireland are obvious. But leaving that aside, I learned a great deal about how religious beliefs are incorporated into both individual and group identities, often in opposition to the differing beliefs of other groups. It may seem that the experience of Protestants, even if Anglicans, in Ireland is very different from that of Anglicans in England where we do not have the same overt inter-communal conflicts. However, in more subtle ways the same dynamics are ubiquitous in the Church of England. Those who find their identity and value through accepting beliefs that they identify with the truth revealed by God, and whose church communities share those beliefs, and whose membership of those communities depends upon their continued acceptance of those beliefs *cannot* give alternatives serious consideration without risking the loss of the whole structure of meaning and corporate belonging which gives their lives significance and value. If such believers are antagonistic towards those who disagree with them, this is notobscurantism or bigotry it is

necessary for their emotional survival. Besides which, they genuinely believe that they are being faithful to "the revealed word of God."

One of the great failures of what may loosely be called the liberal wing of the Church of England in its conflicts with the more conservative wing is that it fails to comprehend the seriousness and authenticity of a belief in revelation for traditionalists. Since this belief is inextricably involved in conservative believers' sense of identity both as individuals and as members of their churches, and also gives value, purpose and meaning to their lives, it is not negotiable. If conservatives are criticised for hanging onto what for others may seem obscurantist beliefs, they will only experience this as a personal attack, which normally it is, and will then either counter-attack, leading to an unhelpful escalation of hostility, or else disengage and withdraw into communities of the like-minded. These negative exchanges are all too common in the Church of England and they achieve nothing, except for creating antagonism.

The God of Group Belonging

The present disputes over such subjects as the ordination of women and sexuality arise because the traditional teachings which conservatives regard as revealed by God are experienced by many others as oppressive. In general terms, because membership of a religious group entails conformity to its boundary conditions, in other words, its religious, intellectual and moral norms, the price to a believer of belonging to a Christian community with strict norms of belief or morality may be very great. James Alison used to be a Dominican priest. He came out as gay and suffered discrimination and exclusion by the Roman Catholic hierarchy as a result, eventually leaving the Dominican order. Although he speaks from a particular type of experience, the dynamics he describes

operate in many different circumstances and exclude many others than homosexuals from full participation in the Church. Alison's depiction of what being in the Catholic Church may be like for gay people is disturbing and, I believe, often applies in the Anglican Church:

> The experience of many gay people is that the Church in some way or other, kills us… Typically our inclusion within the structures of church life comes at a very high price: that of agreeing not to speak honestly, of disguising our experience with a series of euphemisms, of having to maintain, through a coded language shared with other 'insiders' within the system, a double life. The message is: you're fine just so long as you don't rock the boat through talking frankly, which is the same as saying: 'You're protected while you play the game our way, but the moment that something "comes to light", you're out. The moment you say something which causes scandal, watch out!' (Alison, 2001, p. 45)

To hide aspects of one's nature in order to gain and retain membership of a group is destructive of a person's individuality and integrity. Even more damaging to such individuals is to internalise the values of the group to which they wish to belong and to apply that group's condemnation of those hidden aspects of their character internally to themselves. The gay experience makes the demand so often presented by the Christian religion to its adherents very clear: *in some aspect of your self you must not be*. As a consequence, churchgoers may sacrifice some element of their fundamental identity or emotional need in order to gain acceptance within their Christian communities. Alison describes this as a sacrifice to *"the god of group belonging."*

Alison expresses very powerfully how oppressively traditional Christian teaching may be experienced by those whose lives do not conform to it, whether they are men or women, straight or gay, or whatever.Although women have always been offered a place in the Christian community, it has traditionally been a subordinate one that in recent generations has come to be experienced by more and more women as oppressive. To conform to the gender stereotypes advocated by the traditionalist god of group belonging has come to be seen by many women as profoundly destructive to themselves. In addition, the traditional male religious imagery in which God is for the most part presented in the Bible and the Christian tradition has also come to seem alienating, because it does not reflect their experience and it reinforces the oppressive structures of patriarchy, in Mary Daly's famous quip: "If God is male then male is God."

Those Christians who have experienced such alienation, for whatever reason, have frequently sought to reform the Church's teaching by protests and campaigns in order to feel that they are accepted and loved by God. We are here in the territory of Cain and Abel, only now,rather than God declaring one sacrifice acceptable and the other not, there is a competition between the two brothers about whom God really accepts and, since the grounds for acceptance of each excludes the other, this competition is not one about which either side can compromise.

Biblical sources for radical theology

The radical and reformist side in this conflictdraws on liberating elements
in the Christian tradition which contradict the traditionalists'
interpretation of it, especially Jesus' unconditional acceptance of sinners
and outcasts who were rejected by the religious leaders of the Jewish
people. This approach enables them to identify the traditionalists with
the Pharisees or Sadducees who resisted the radical, socially and
religiously subversive teaching of Jesus, and eventually conspired to have
him killed. In this way the reformists can identify themselves as on the
side of truth, seeking to cleanse the Church ofa distorted understanding
which is not only oppressive but is in opposition to the real meaning of
Jesus' teaching.

They also make extensive use of the Exodus tradition in the Old
Testament. This is particularly significant because it is the central
biblical tradition for liberation theology which is hugely influential upon
feminist and gay theologies. Liberation theology represents a different
take on the covenant tradition from that found in conservative theologies.
Rather than limiting the identity of the Chosen People to the Jews or the
Church, the poor are given that status, and God is believed to have an
'option for the poor'. Liberation theologians build on the extensive
biblical texts which advocate social justice and castigate the rich for
ignoring the needs of the poor, the exile, the slave, etc. God's central
action for his people is seen as bringing them liberation when they were
slaves in Egypt. From this perspective, the Exodus becomes the
paradigm for God's saving action *now* to release all those who are in
bondage.

Black, feminist and gay theologies extend the range of God's 'option for the poor' to include, variously, all those who are socially excluded or disadvantaged in any way, whether on the grounds of race, gender or sexuality. Thus the promises of God to Israel are reapplied to those who experience themselves as oppressed, including those oppressed by the Church. As a result, such liberationists are able to fight the traditional teaching and institutional structures of the Church in the name of God, and the whole prophetic tradition of complaint against the unfaithful ruling authorities in Israel and Judah can also be used as justification and ammunition.

Liberation theology has another very important facet that hinders negotiation between the two sides: it holds that only the poor have knowledge of God; the rich are deluded in thinking that they do. Indeed, only those who are working for the liberation of the poor can make any claim to the favour of God. From this perspective, it does not really matter what arguments are made by traditionalists, they are irrelevant because they have no authority and may be regarded as so much self-justification for going against the will of God to liberate his people.The claim that they are based on revelation is discounted.This exclusion of the traditionalist perspective and those who uphold it means that the liberationist alternative does not solve the problem of the god of group belonging. It merely inverts its terms: instead of the historically dominant traditionalist group being seen as favoured by God, the historically oppressed radical group are identified as the people whom God loves. The so-called 'oppressors' are regarded as enemies of God. They are excluded from knowledge of or relationship with God, unless they repent and give up their institutional advantages, because it is only

the poor who know God. Of course, many traditionalists would say that the situation is now reversed: that they are now the ones who are oppressed and excluded.

It is worth asking what is going on here from a psychological perspective. The extension of biblical teaching about the poor to women and gays is necessitated because in general biblical teaching is so overwhelmingly patriarchal and it condemns homosexual acts. It can only be made in any way congenial to reformist women and gays and lesbians by a laborious process of "retrieval" of elements that have been submerged by the writing and traditional interpretation of the biblical texts. Alternatively, they need to use aliberationist hermeneutic which locates authority outside the text and the hierarchy in the lives of the excluded. Why do people look for acceptance to a tradition whichhistorically rejects what they want, rather than giving up Christianity or starting their own radical religion? One reason why reformists are so often hostile to traditionalists is, I believe, unacknowledged doubt that the tradition genuinely supports what they are seeking from it.

The current disputes as a battle over the identity of the chosen people

In summary, although this may appear a rather extreme way of putting it, at the core of the dispute in the Church of England between traditionalists and radicalsis the implicit and mutually exclusive claim of each side to be the true successors of the Jews as God's chosen people, combined with the belief that the terms of the covenant favour them. At an emotional level this is driven on both sides by a desire for inclusion, love, acceptance and value, made all the more necessary the more the various

disputants are using membership of the Church as a means of compensating for psychological insecurity and deficiencies in their own upbringing. This is not to say that everyone who advocates for one side or the other in this debate is driven by neurotic or immature psychological needs, but it is to say that unless those needs of the participants are met they cannot be reconciled with their opponents.

A particulardanger in this situation is the development of what the Croatian theologian MiroslavVolf,writing from his experience of the violence in the Balkans following the collapse of Yugoslavia, calls *a competition in victimhood*. Most situations of conflict are complex and all parties may believe that they are the ones who are the victims. As Volf says:If the plot is written around the schema of "oppressed" ("victims") and "oppressors" ("perpetrators"), each party will find good reasons for claiming the higher moral ground of a victim; each will perceive itself as oppressed by the other and all will see themselves as engaged in the struggle for liberation. (Volf, 1996, pp. 102-3)

Scapegoating

Normally such attitudes are associated with mutual scapegoating. Scapegoat psychology is endemic within the Church. When they identify themselves or their communities with the favour of God, Christians often repress and project those negative aspects of their characters that do not conform to the will of God or their own positive self-image onto scapegoats, who are then blamed and persecuted for having those characteristics. Opposing groups within the Church frequently appear to be projecting their own unconscious negative qualities onto each other. Such projections often fall upon members of the wider Church who hold

different doctrinal opinions, or who do not appear to live up to the same ethical standards as those the projectors promote, such as, theological liberals, theological conservatives, Evangelicals, divorcees, homosexuals, and women who believe that they are called to be ordained as priests. This process usually involves qualities which both sides possess but which they do not acknowledge, such as doubt, intolerance or irrationality, and which, through projection, they both experience as belonging to the other. Consequently, it is the "others" who are experienced as being the ones who are wrong and prejudiced and who need to change their views and behaviour.

The projection of the negative onto an opposition group enables the projectors to blame that group for the existence of those negative qualities in the Church, thereby avoiding any acknowledgement of their own responsibility and negative qualities, and maintaining a good conscience. Scapegoating is very often involved in the quest for purity in the Church and is particularly evident in the dispute between liberals and conservatives. The particular problem it presents for those working with conflict is that those who scapegoat cannot withdraw the projections without acknowledging their own role in the conflict and accepting that they are not entirely innocent. Furthermore, they may need to keep their opponents as opponents precisely so that they can use the mechanism of scapegoating to protect themselves from seeing what they are really like.People have to have sufficient ego strength and at least a moderate degree of self-worth in order to be able to recognise their own negative attitudes and behaviour. Those who cannot have to continue to project their negative onto othersand blame them for all the problems in the relationship. Such dynamics are very common between hostile groups

Working with conflict

Where does all this leave us? It is not likely that the warring factions in the Church of England, let alone the Anglican Communion more generally, are going to be reconciled any time soon. Indeed, the mutually exclusive nature of their claims and the deep incompatibility of their theological outlooks may well be irresolvable. I don't think it is too far-fetched to say that they are in fact promoting different gospels, if not different religions. The church is in a situation analogous to that in Israel-Palestine: two groups are claiming possession of the same territory with a divine mandate. Both sides have too much to lose. It is not surprising that at the corporate level the Church as an institution has been unable to find a solution. This inability is compounded by the fact that there is no central doctrinal authority in the Church of England that has the power to impose a solution on the disputing parties. The chief mitigating factor is that there are plenty of other people living in the land who do not accept what either side is claiming. I should point out that there are a large number of individuals in the Church of England who do not adopt either of these two polarised positions, but I have emphasized them because they are at the heart of the present conflict and there is no time to examine others' attitudes.The best that the institutional Church can do in the present conflict is to seek for practical compromises which are at least tolerable as holding measures for those involved. Theological statements by the institution are generally political fudges that satisfy no one, but it is unreasonable to expect them to be anything else when the theological presuppositions of the disputants are so far apart.

Seeking to engage with people in such polarised and mutually excluding positions is hugely difficult. However, we may be helped by bearing in mind a very important characteristic of chronic situations of conflict: they usually exhibit a repetitive pattern of interaction that is circular. In other words, events go around one after the other in such a way that they end up in the place where they began and then start again. Such circularities are responsible for the sterile and unconstructive nature of these interactions. On the one hand, these repetitive patterns give rise to a sense of helplessness and despair alongside much anger, bitterness and blaming of the other side. On the other hand, the fact that they are circular provides the opportunity for change: if you can introduce a difference at any point in the cycle the next phase of the interaction will be different in some way, and it may be that that difference can be maintained and result in a significant change in the quality of the interaction. Against this there is a homeostatic tendency in any relationship system which is likely to negate any variations and return the system to its previous stable state.

For example, take a couple in which there are a lot of arguments. Some of which include very vicious personal comments. Each of the partners feels aggrieved and blames the other. They may well be involved in a concertina pattern of relationship, which means that they move between periods of emotional and physical closeness and periods of distance. The chances are that they are both looking for a degree of love and acceptance from the other that together they find unsustainable. Often individuals cannot tolerate the closeness that they long for because it feels like they are being overwhelmed or swallowed by the other. The consequence in such a relationship is that when they are distant, they want to get closer because they are lonely and feel anxious. As they get closer there is a

period when things go well, but after a while, for one or the other it gets too much, and so that one does something, probably unconsciously, which provokes the other to object and so an argument erupts. This establishes the required distance and the cycle begins again. Interestingly, such couples may use the arguments as a way of being close without the risk of being taken over: the heat of their exchange is actually a form of intimacy; while the anger prevents it from becoming too much. If they can be encouraged to become aware of their anxieties and to signal the need for more space rather than creating a row, the whole pattern can be altered, and the rows eliminated.

It is interesting to compare this cycle with the interaction of the arguing parties in the Church of England. Here there are few, if any, periods of warmth, but the arguments provide a form of contact; and they are certainly hugely preoccupied with each other.I cannot help wondering whether they in fact need each other in some way, if only as the carriers of projections. Engaging in such conflict is, after all, a very effective way of avoiding looking at oneself and one's own inadequacies, doubts and so forth. What are they afraid they will learn about themselves if they stop fighting? How might they have to change? At any rate the interactions between the parties are repetitive and circular to the point of tedium. I have been ordained over thirty years and they do not seem to have changed in any essentials in that period. If those concerned, or if those who are less directly involved could help those who are to discover any kind of different responseto their opponents, the space might be opened up for something different to occur. Describing the situation differently, reframing it, even if the redescription is rejected by the other side, can begin a different kind of conversation. For example, it would be

interesting to ask what the warring parties gain from the conflict instead of simply looking at what they lose.

In situations of conflict another normal feature is that the parties do not really know each other. Usually their conception of the other is conditioned by past events and past perceptions, and these latter are likely to be one-sided, only representing what the conflict looks like from their own side. Conflict makes the participants defensive. Consequently, they tend to emphasise justifications for their own position and minimise those of their opponents. Generally self-reflection is likely to be considerably inhibited. For these reasons a really good placefor the pastoral carer to seek to introduce a difference that might make a difference isin how the participants view themselves and each other, and in the stories they each tell about the conflict.

You may be familiar with narrative therapy, which is much influenced by the thought of Michel Foucault and concentrates on the stories that people tell about problematic situations. Foucault thought that those who suffer oppression are subjected to dominant narratives which are imposed upon them by their oppressors, and he sought to identify the subjugated narratives of the oppressed, so that they could rebuild their own identity. For example, colonised peoples have often been told that their indigenous cultures are inferior to those of their colonisers. Rediscovering their original myths and history and, very often, reclaiming their own language too, has been an important part of the process of resistance and of decolonisation. This was certainly so in Ireland, where in the Republic systematic efforts have been made to rewrite their history emphasising the cruelty and injustice of the British and the richness of indigenous Irish culture; and learning the Irish language is still compulsory in schools.

When individuals or groups feel attacked they will either counter-attack or close down to protect themselves. Those who feel themselves under threat from opponents are very unlikely to be prepared to be self-reflective, and certainly not to identify where they may be wrong and their opponents right. They need to feel strong enough in their own position and confident enough about their own identitybefore they can begin to risk subjecting what they are doing to any sort of critique, let alone the perilous enterprise oftalking to their opponents. This is why the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland engages in 'single community' work before bringing groups of Protestants and Catholics together. People need to know what they think and what they want to communicate before they can risk a genuine meeting with the other side. This is one reason why rediscovering and retelling their own stories in their own terms is so important.

Conversely, very often opponents do not really know what makes the other tick, and interpret what the other says or does on the basis of negative expectations, fuelled by memories going back years of the other's misbehaviour, memories which generally ignore or minimise their own contribution to any difficulties. In couples therapy conflictual partners commonly find it very difficult to comprehend how their mutual situation is experienced by the other, and so minimise the importance of the other's concerns or the reasons why they matter. A necessary step towards reconciliation is creating the conditions within which each can enter imaginatively into the perspective of the other, at least sufficiently to permit the growth of some minimum degree of empathy. In other words, each needs to imagine how the other sees him- or herself, and

what it is like to look out at the world through the other's eyes. The same is true with groups.

Part of what I have been attempting to do in this paper is to tell the story of the conflict between conservatives and reformers in the Church of England from a different perspective from those normally advanced. Professionals working in pastoral care need to be aware of multiple perspectives on any particular conflict, whether between groups or individuals. And, whether working with both parties together or only one at a time,it is important both to facilitate themto tell their own stories in positive terms, and to imagine, or hear from the other if possible, how the other tells the story. This double process introduces a difference into the repetitive pattern of interaction andenables self-reflection to take place. It also developsimaginative understanding of what the concerns of the other really are.At this point a genuine meeting has already begun which may make it safe enough for the participants to rewrite andco-create, if possible, their stories in such a way that they encompass both perspectives and recognise their value. Such mutually sensitive stories make reconciliation possible or, at least, they enable the partiesinvolved to negotiate how to handle fundamental differences. This is a very difficult task but if it can be achieved, the possibility of a different more constructive relationship can be opened up – even, let us be optimistic, between the warring parties in the Church of England.

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