

Does Religion Fuel or Heal in Conflicts?

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Forgiveness and Reconciliation:
Religious Contributions to Conflict Resolution

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Some years ago, preparing a conference on the Middle East, I mentioned to the late Israeli General and peace activist Yehoshafat Harkabi that I planned to include a panel on the role of religion in the search for peace. Harkabi reacted in horror, asking: "Why would you do that? I would have thought the role entirely negative." This seemed a bit heavy-handed to me, and I responded to it practically as a joke, saying we had these and these and these speakers, Jewish, Christian and Muslim, and they would address the positive elements in the role. Harkabi was unflinching: "You are going to take religion to the beauty parlor," he answered, and of course I then introduced the panel, at the conference, with that story.

A caution is required at the very beginning of this discussion of religion as a resource for the resolution of conflicts. It is not that religion has too often failed to fulfill that role, though that is true and we will have to discuss it; but rather that one ought not look to religion for purposes other than its own.

A religious faith is in itself an all-encompassing outlook on life, on the world and its meaning. It generates its own agenda, and reluctant though we may be, we must allow it to do that. Outsiders who try to utilize religion for their own purposes may have good or bad agendas of their own, and even those of us who regard ourselves as insiders to a faith community may yield to the temptation of using religion for an extraneous purpose. We in this room, of course, looking to religion as a help in resolving conflicts, have the best motives anyone might think of. But it is always an abuse of religious faith to make it instrument for something else.

I state this so sharply at the beginning out of a realization of how hard a saying it is. We all have difficulty in trusting the religious institutions to set their own agendas, because they have behaved so badly. Ethnic nationalism is a primary case in point. We see the instance in the former Yugoslavia, where ethnic identities have been so tied to religion that Serb and Orthodox are practically interchangeable terms in people's consciousness, Croat and Catholic become equally the badges under which Muslims are to be persecuted, excluded, "ethnically cleansed." In those countries, where Serb, Croat and Bosnian Muslim are all from the same Slavic stock, there is hardly any other content to ethnicity than religious difference.

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In Ireland, ever since the Protestant Reformation, religion has not been basically about religion. Rather, Catholic and Protestant identities have been loyalty tests, right down to the present, for Irish Nationalism or loyalty to the English/British crown. We often have to remind ourselves that the Anglo-Irish conflict predates the Protestant Reformation by some four hundred years. Everyone in this picture, until then, was Catholic. But as soon as a religious difference became available, it was utilized immediately for this purpose of identifying political allegiance. Religion, Jewish, Christian and Muslim, invades every corner of the Middle East conflict, with dire results.

South Africa has seen its parallels. The practice and conceptualization of *apartheid* were basically invented in church. Religious doctrine, judged by its opponents to have been actually heresy, served then as its rationalization: church as locus of superiority assumptions. And we Americans, with our history of “Manifest Destiny” delusions, take our place in the line.

Religion has in this way acquired a strangely sinister reputation among those who work for the resolution or transformation of conflicts. The assumption, conventional by now, is that religious faith commitment, or the sense of identification with a faith community, fosters division, hatred and violence.

This impression arises from a badly chequered history. European Western “Christendom” and its American and other once-colonial appendages have witnessed a widespread popular alienation from the institutional churches. I date this phenomenon to the religious wars of the 17th century, which left the battered peoples of Europe with the conviction that their churches had failed them.

Several times I have remarked to Muslim friends that the Islamic community, on the whole, has experienced no comparable alienation from its faith or its institutions. The response they have often given me is that they hope such alienation will not result from the ways Islam is being used, instrumentally, for political purposes or as a means of expressing anger in our own time. Many Western Ashkenazi Jews seem to have acquired a similar alienation from religious authority and institutions as if by contagion from their European Christian neighbors. This manifests itself not only in Europe and America, but also in Jewish secularism in the state of Israel, to the great puzzlement of Sephardic Israelis, who have experienced no such alienation.

But from the time of Europe’s religious wars, after a bloody century not rivaled until our own, professed agnosticism or atheism became commonplace in Christian lands in a way seldom seen before. Institutional religious authority found itself suspect, in the eyes of the intellectual mainstream of society, of promoting only its own private power interests, not the faith agenda of the believing community. There had been reasons enough before to complain of corruption in the Christian Church. Medieval demands for reform in head and members had led eventually to the Reformation itself. But this sense of broken faith centered now on the cult of violence.

That massive breach of confidence in religion and its leadership coincided with the opening of what we have called "The Modern Age." That term calls for definition. I see three principal building blocks in what we have regarded as modernity. First was the scientific revolution, beginning with Copernicus and Galileo and spreading to all areas of study of the material universe, which has given Western civilization its exponential technological growth. Then came, as a second component, the philosophical Enlightenment of the 17th-18th centuries, the cult of reason. The third element was the political liberalism which led, through the period of "Enlightened Despots," to the English, American, French and Russian revolutions and the development of representative government.

For true believers in The Modern Age, these three things gave the answers to all the questions. Religious faith began to look like a curious atavism, a throwback to outmoded superstitions. European theologies, with all their differences and rivalries, became of one kind, in that for all of them the central question became: "How can you believe these things in the modern age?" The liberation theologies of more recent decades have recognized that this shift to a near-exclusive preoccupation with apologetics led to an impoverishment of faith. They have identified it as adolescent theology, and in its place they make the central question of theology how our faith relates us to the poor or the oppressed, or more generally whether our faith is truly something to be lived, in action.

This amounts to a major theological transformation in our own time, but it is not only the theologians who have changed. The devastating cruelty and violence of the 20th century have finally taught that intellectual mainstream, so long alienated from religion, that the three holy icons of The Modern Age, science, rational enlightenment and liberal politics, have not in fact answered all the questions.

People mean different things when they speak of "Post-Modernism," but one phenomenon to which the term can be applied is the way serious people now look to the wisdom traditions, including often the whole spectrum of traditional faiths, to supply what modernism has failed to provide. They are as suspicious as ever of the institutions – I surely join them in that. But this turning, at least with curiosity and often with hope, to the traditional sources of faith creates a new situation in which we should look at the relation between religion and violence. We should see what poisons have been in the mix – let's not pretend they have not been there -- and ask how we might get to the healing and reconciling role that we would expect of religion.

There are of course some other potential reasons for this tarnishing of the religious record in areas of conflict. Besides this extrinsic cause, the instrumental use of religion, there may be intrinsic stimuli to the rejection and exclusion of others, and the licensing of violence against them: concepts of divine revelation or election that establish sharp separation between the recipients of God's word, or the elect, and the reprobate or

unbelievers. Or great harm may be done by concepts of an angry, vengeful God, in whose service we may visit wrath upon our enemies.

Any of these phenomena, as I read it, truly contradict the reconciliation tenets of faith, which are a common theme across a broad range of confessional positions. And if here I speak primarily of Christian faith, it is because that is mine and is most familiar to me. I am conscious that some other faiths too lay great emphasis on reconciliation.

In Christian experience, a great watershed occurred with the legalization of the Christian Church under Constantine. If we read our way into the dialogue that today begins to take place between Christians and Muslims we soon hear about one great difference that is supposed to exist between us: that for Christians Church and State are separate while for Muslims religious and civil society are one. I have never believed that this dichotomy has been as clear or as absolute in actual historic experience as that observation indicates. But it is true that, in its beginnings the Islamic faith community, gathered about the Prophet Mohammed first in Medina, and then in Mecca, did simultaneously govern civil society. The Christian community in contrast was, for its first three centuries, an outsider group, barely if at all tolerated by the Roman imperial State, alien and marginalized within its culture.

For as long as, and to the extent that that was true, the Christian community had neither power in nor responsibility for the State. The Christians were not all, as they are sometimes presented, the poor and enslaved, fringe people in Roman society. Prominent people, even some members of the senatorial class and imperial family, came into it from early on. But it was not until the opening years of the 4th century that the weight of the Christian community was such that the power class of the Empire felt they had need of it.

Constantine changed the game and this made a tremendous difference in what it meant to be a Christian. Where before it had been risk, something one undertook only out of deep conviction and that involved everything in one's life, now it was the smart thing to do, one of the conditions of worldly advancement. The Emperor needed the bishops and the community they could vouch for. The bishops understood that they had attained their position of privilege for reasons other than the advancement of Christian faith, but chose nonetheless to give unqualified adulation to the Emperor. They treated him and his intervention on their behalf as the direct act of God, while giving him the assent and moral support he sought from them. It was politic.

We can describe this as the Constantinian order in the Church. Church and State were to be two parallel bodies, reflective of one another: the State commanding the obedience of the subjects, the Church supporting its demands and providing the moral context within which the State would act. The administrative structures of the Roman State, such as dioceses and vicariates, were exactly duplicated in the Church, and remain even now. The **role** of the Church was to be the **paradigm to the State**. For more than a

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thousand years, this **PARADIGMATIC ROLE OF THE CHURCH**, the Constantinian pattern, remained the norm, and in some odd places we find vestiges of it even today.

Some may see this as particularly a problem of the Orthodox churches of Eastern Europe, which by consistent tradition have organized themselves as national churches. I raised this somewhat over a year ago with an Orthodox theologian for whom I have great admiration, Professor Petros Vasiliadis of the Ecumenical Institute at the University of Thessaloniki. In the Balkan conflict, I felt, national governments had striven hard to commandeer the loyalties of their populations to the church as an instrument for their war purposes.

Professor Vasiliadis was interesting on the point. He said he preferred the Orthodox eccesiological model, with its theology of the local church, to the centralized Roman one. The central authority apparatus had its advantages, when quick leadership response was needed in an emergency. But otherwise there was more opportunity for respectfully consultative government, collegiality to use the Roman term, in the Eastern model. I could not do otherwise than agree with him. The model of the local church, however, as place of the Spirit's leading, is not the church of a nation. It is the congregation, the assembly of believers who meet in one place. They are in carefully cultivated communion, granted, with others elsewhere, but nonetheless they are the *locus* of the Spirit's activity where they are. That is the model of the Pauline and other early churches.

But let's not deceive ourselves that it is only Eastern Orthodoxy that is afflicted with this determination of the state or other organized forces to co-opt the church for purposes foreign to its mission. All governments have caught on to the fact that churches are the custodians of Just War theory. When the war begins, every government appeals at once to the church to get up in the cheering section and proclaim that "God is on our side." We never belong there. Our role as proclaimers of *shalom* demands of us that we be searching actively for the alternatives to violence. But we have all seen churches fall right into the trap and preach national exclusivism and God's wrath, as if they were qualified to declare it, upon the enemy.

The Constantinian model eventually failed to sustain itself, as the struggles between church and empire in Europe eventuated in defeat for the church and the stripping away, by Napoleon's time, of those powers that paralleled the state.

But however much the Constantinian order may have compromised the very faith of the Church throughout its long course, the bishops and other authorities who had grown so used to it saw its demise as a sad event, the deprivation of their accustomed institutional position. They instituted a rear-guard action to preserve as much of the old order as they could. If the Church could no longer parallel all the powers of the State, they would preserve and institutionalize those they could, most especially their control of

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marriage, of education and of the caring services of society (hospitals, charity etc.) As a substitute for the no longer feasible paradigmatic role, we can describe this as a **PRAGMATIC ROLE OF THE CHURCH.**

It was heavily contested by the power of the State, and always exercised with regret for the paradigmatic role that had been lost. It was seen by both Church and State authorities as second best. We can see it in what Germans call *Kultur-politik*, the administration of these cultural areas of family, school and welfare, with Church and State competing for control. Especially the 19th-century *Kulturkampf* was a concerted effort of the Bismarckian State to wrest control of these functions from the churches, particularly from the Catholic Church, but we can see it as well in Nazi campaigns against the churches, in the repressive anti-church activities of the Communist states, and even in a good deal of current American policy of creating obstacles to Church control over schools or hospitals.

What substitute remains to us if these two long-traditional models for the Church's role in society, paradigmatic and pragmatic, have both so failed? If, again, we look to the original experience of Christian community in the early centuries, we will not find it useful or historically true to pretend we live in a time other than our own, when Christians were without a recognized role or responsibility in society. But we can usefully look to the way in which their faith convictions as such, the living out of their faith, rather than institutionalized power, determined the role of Christian community in society. If our emphasis as Church were consistently on the building up of active faith commitment, i.e. basically catechetical, we could expect the presence of a Christian community to influence, in organic and pervasive ways, the free corporate decisions of the society. A useful descriptive term for such a manner of Church activity in society's concern is the mathematical figure of the *parabola*, the plane curve generated by a point moving so that its distance from a fixed point is equal to its distance from a fixed line, the curve widening out between parallel lines without ever touching them. Thus our *third* model of the Church's activity in society is the **PARABOLIC ROLE OF THE CHURCH.**¹

There is no way to claim that such a procedure is accomplished fact in the Church of our own time, only a rather far-out aspiration. That there is a hankering still for the full Constantinian paradigmatic model can be seen in a couple of extraordinarily instructive episodes of recent history.

¹These terms for the roles of Church in society -- *paradigmatic* for the Constantinian model, *pragmatic* for the familiar fall-back position, *parabolic* for the more faithful model recommended here -- are not my own, but come from a teacher I felt privileged to hear, Argentinian Methodist Professor Jose Miguez-Bonino, when I was in graduate studies at Union Theological Seminary in the late 1960s. Miguez-Bonino uses them extensively in his many works, but I have reflected on them over so many years as to have made my own use of them.

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Since the publication in the 1960s of Rolf Hochhuth's play, *Der Stellvertreter* ("The Deputy," or "The Vicar [of Christ]"), the complaint has frequently been made that Pope Pius XII, during World War II, failed to act decisively enough against the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews. Much has been said and written for and against this charge, but we can properly ask: where were the Catholics of Germany that they needed to be ordered by the Pope to resist the Holocaust? Was their faith not internalized enough to lead them to this without a papal order?

During the Vietnam war, Catholics had a large role in the anti-war movement in the United States, and many of them complained that the Catholic bishops of the U.S. did not plainly condemn the war as unjust, and prohibit participation in it or payment of taxes that would be spent in prosecuting it. Had the bishops done that, quite probably they might have ended the war. Simultaneously they would have brought down to ruin the democratic structure of the United States with its separation of Church and State. Given the dire consequences of any such action, we can again ask: where were the consciences of U.S. Catholics that they could not reject a war they saw as unjust without the bishops commanding them to do so?

I've gone through these three models of the Church's sense of its role in the world, paradigmatic, pragmatic and parabolic, in order to introduce some intelligibility into a dreadful part of our history: how the churches have lent themselves so easily and regularly to cooptation. The parabolic model, at this stage in our history, is simply a hope.

Can we then expect anything better from the religions? I think what I have said so far makes clear that this is essentially a theological question. It requires to be answered in terms of an agenda of faith, not one externally imposed.

In the Northern Ireland situation, with which I have worked intensively ever since 1972, it became evident to me that many of the people, most of them with experience of violence and prison, who were the creators of the peace process were thoroughly alienated from their religious roots. They were disillusioned with their churches, as institutions that had failed to do their part, or help to heal the conflict. Nonetheless, they themselves operated out of the principles of reconciliation and readiness to forgive injury that were, or should have been, at the very heart of the religious faith and commitment of their churches. They had the substance, even if their church institutions had not.

We expect that commitment to reconciliation to characterize any of the faith communities. They seem to be strong in theory, weak in practice of that quality.

I speak from within a community of Christian faith, which has great importance to me. I've seen the working of several other faith communities, understood something of their theological positions and the concrete practice of their commitments. I won't try to

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Speak for them on this subject of reconciliation, but commend, to those of you who live in those other traditions, to examine teaching and practice in this matter of reconciliation within them and explain it to the rest of us.

Within my Christian context, nothing has greater theoretical priority. The Christian Gospel accounts abound in summonses to reconciliation, perhaps nowhere more imperatively than in *Matthew 5, 23-24*: "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift." Ritual practice can wait, and has no importance comparable to that of reconciliation.

So much for theory. In practice, Christian history has shown us a lot of concern with justice, consistently retributive justice. We hear far less of reconciliation or the practice of forgiveness that the Gospels so much urge. But a peculiar thing happened to the practice of reconciliation in Christian history. It disappeared into the confessional and became exclusively forgiveness of sin by God.

In this way it was privatized, made exclusively a matter between me and Jesus. Reconciliation with the brother, the sister, the neighbor tended to be lost in the shuffle. Especially the public character of reconciliation and forgiveness, the reestablishment of wholeness in the relations between nations and peoples, failed to become a focus in the life of the faith community. Concepts of retribution and compulsion reigned supreme in all those public areas.

We may think of that disappearance into the confessional as a peculiarly Catholic phenomenon. But indeed, just over these last years I have found myself in a lengthy correspondence with a good friend in Northern Ireland, a leading Protestant clergyman, who contended that the only reconciliation taught or recognized in Christian scripture is that between God and man. He would acknowledge no possibility or need for reconciliation between human persons. I found myself asking him: did he even read that book? I don't want to cast the blame on him, but the experience told me that Protestants had assimilated some of the bad habits of medieval and current Catholicism.

This is an internal question of practice within the Christian faith community, of interest to all of us within that circle, and surely an instance of serious discrepancy between faith and historic practice. The other faith communities may have a more or a less consistent experience in this area.

Look to the major successes in the healing of conflicts that we have seen in recent years. Sometimes our hopes, once raised, seem to be dashed, but there are in fact genuine accomplishments to record. An important one was the Oslo Declaration of Principles that brought the first real prospect of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. The principal

representatives of these two peoples who, for at least forty-five years, had refused to recognize one another's legitimacy as peoples, formally and publicly did exactly that. Hesitations there were, reservations within that acceptance, some of which gradually warmed, rejectionist factions on the fringes of both communities, disappointments on both sides that the accord contained so little specific agreement. Yet the mutual recognition, the acceptance by each people of the other, had profound implications. I would regard them as having basis within the faith convictions of each community, the reverence for the other, for the stranger, that each faith inculcated, even for those to whom that faith was only a cultural recollection.

We may have the impression, after the troubles of more recent years, that a determined effort was made to retract that recognition of the other people's legitimacy. If so, the good news is that it proved impossible. Such a solemn recognition, once granted, could not be rescinded, and the seeds of peace once planted have survived to be watered once again.

Something similar happened in the Northern Ireland conflict, leading to the twin cease-fires of IRA and Loyalist militants in 1994. In this case, those who had taken most active part in the violence of the previous quarter century were among the first to accept that their society could only be healed by accommodation of one another. The essential meaning of the cease-fires was recognition by the militants of either side that the other tradition must have their respect, that they must become the guarantors of one another's difference, that as either side aspired to the establishment of constitutional arrangements that would validate their own communal identity, it could be done only by agreement with the other. In Northern Ireland, the main-stream politicians, those who always prided themselves on their rejection of violence, though sometimes calling for extremes of state repression against the dissidents of their society, had far more trouble understanding these developments than those who had been in the throes of the conflict. Even when the cease-fires themselves broke down out of a feeling of intransigence, the breach could not be maintained after the basic recognitions that had been granted.

This tells us, I believe, much about what religion can bring about for the resolution of conflict. I have already mentioned the alienation from religious institution that characterized many of the people who brought about these enormous changes in attitude in Northern Ireland, yet the roots of their action still lie deep in their traditions of faith, even when they have adjudged their churches, or their religious leadership, lacking precisely in that faith.

Many of us have a very particular interest in the theme of restorative justice, as much a social as a religious issue. It has its importance within the legal system or in any striving for international peace, in the resolution or transformation of conflicts. In our country this has become an important concern among a broad range of lawyers and judges, who have seen the purely retributive system characteristic of our practice of

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justice as poisoning our society with a cult of vengeance.

The concept needs grounding in the wisdom traditions, something we may seek in the various faith communities. Without that, the work undertaken will likely amount to no more than tinkering with the legal system, and will fall short of the profound transformation it could make in our society.

Dr. Rodney Petersen and I, in the Boston Theological Institute, had brought groups of theology graduate students to see the work of peacemaking in Northern Ireland, in the former Yugoslavia and most recently in South Africa over these last few years. We came close to organizing a conference in Boston this year that would have been simply among theologians on the theme of reconciliation. But then we got to talking with lawyers and the congruence of our reconciliation theme with the concern of the legal community for restorative justice so impressed us that our conference took that direction. I believe that it is in the informing of the justice enterprise with the best strivings of the wisdom traditions, even where they have fallen short of their own teachings in practice, that we will best succeed in fostering a more humane society.

Let me turn then, in conclusion, to a consideration of the law. I will tell you of an experience that deeply impressed me.

Working with the conflicted peoples of Lebanon, as far back as 1983, I found that people in the various confessional communities all tended to express their anxieties about one another in terms of the law. Christians and Muslims alike feared that the other would try to cheat them of their true identity and bring them into subjection to themselves by means of the law. Christians felt that, if Muslims ever came to power in Lebanon, they would introduce Islamic Law and transform the country into an Islamic Republic, leaving them as second-class citizens. Muslims believed that they themselves had already been reduced to second-class citizenship by the introduction of European concepts of law during the French Mandate period.

The actual system of law in Lebanon was basically *Code Napoleon* from that French period, modified by some positive legislation and some remnants of Ottoman law. But the areas of family law, involving among other things marriage, divorce and inheritance, were governed instead by *Statutes Personelles*, the particular law traditions of each of the confessional communities. As there was no organic link between these particular traditions and the rest of the corpus of public law, their relation mirrored the fragility of Lebanese society.

The particular traditions were of course much broader than this area of family law, and were profoundly an expression of the culture of the respective communities, deeply rooted, of course, in religious faith. But those parts of them that were inoperative lay fallow in the culture like the parts of an iceberg that are concealed beneath the

surface. Concealed so, present but unexamined, they contributed little more to the culture than prejudice and stereotype.

My interest in this Lebanese case was in equality of citizenship, and the way each of the traditions, without losing its integrity, could relate to this. I contended that the original formative insights of each of the traditions of law contained great treasures that could be restorative of relations within the whole composite society. My proposal of a program of Legal Anthropology was that each of the traditions should delve deeply into its own culture of law to find those root insights and illuminate them for people of the other traditions.

I was especially conscious of the way the root traditions of Islam validate the legitimacy of the religious faith of the other Peoples of the Book, and make it a special task of the Muslim community, the *umma*, to preserve the freedom of the other faith communities. The traditional implementation of this profound insight was constricted by the relatively primitive political technology of that early time. As a result, Christians living among Muslims, as in Lebanon, remained wary of the *dhimmi* status, the condition of “protected peoples,” free to maintain their religious faith but expected to leave all responsibility for the public affairs of the society to Muslims. Deep search into the roots of the tradition, I felt, could bring these creative originative insights fully into the life of a contemporary political culture.

In this way, all the varied confessional traditions of Lebanon could develop a corpus of civil law, coherent but respectful of differences, admitting distinctions of law where necessary in the traditions of the various communities. They could allow appeal to the disparate traditions in such a way that they would acquire standing and a home in Lebanese law, bringing all these strands into an organic relation. The corpus of Lebanese law could then become a true expression of Lebanese society in its unity and its pluralism.

Now law can easily become just a collection of rules, and can be treated with a kind of legal positivism that sees only prescriptions and no context -- spiritual, cultural or other. I actually understand this in terms of something much more, of placing the origins of these particular cultures of law in the spiritual contexts that gave rise to them. It is when law functions in that kind of context that it can build and restore relations.

This was of course a particular case, with the limits of a particular case. It had evident relation to the rest of the Arab world, and at the time attracted attention in several Arab countries. I believe it has a wider relevance to the healing of relations that will be the making of our peace in other parts of our world. If, from our varied religious heritages, peace and not affliction is to result, we will have to look to such practical effects of them as these in our lives to draw the fruits of reconciliation from them. I would reckon in each of these instances that the good influence of religion has sprung

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directly from its own premises of faith. But we can too easily sour the impact of religion if we use it as instrument for purposes otherwise conceived.