

The Context of Group Identifications and their Conflicts: A Four-Factor Theory of the Dynamic of Conflict

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An ugly series of national- religious- and ethnic-identity conflicts scarred our experience of the latter part of the 20th century, as we emerged from the end of the Cold War. For their time they seemed the primary dangers of our contemporary world until, with the terrorist attack on the major icons of American economic and military power on September 11, 2001, New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon, we found ourselves in a changed world.

Those rather localized conflicts of the '90s often seemed engineered by sinister manipulating forces, power-seeking political or military figures who played cynically on the stereotypes, group anxieties and sense of historical grievance of the populations in question, so as to garner advantage for themselves from their clashes.¹ In the more cataclysmic times that have followed the 9/11 attack, the United States, the greatest political/military power in the world, has been acting out its rage on the rest of the world at the behest of a practically Manichaeian leadership. Over these years many of us have wondered if the terms of our reactions have essentially changed. I will argue here that the type of our rage responses is essentially the same, only now wielded by much larger, even if just as irresponsible, powers.

¹This properly became a matter of study in itself as, characteristically, in *Slaughter Among Neighbors: The Political Origins of Communal Violence* (Human Rights Watch Books), New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1995.

Churches and faith communities are particularly exposed to being used for such paroxysms of rage. If ever they have yielded to the temptation to see themselves as absolutely right and the exclusive custodians of ultimate truth, they fall easily into demeaning and excluding others, lose sight of their basic mission of reconciliation and become the carriers of angry agendas far removed from those of faith.

I was always inclined to believe that, while those elements of stereotype, fear and atavistic memory easily lend themselves to manipulation, the seeds and habits of stereotyping already exist in communities and traditions as ready tools for the manipulators. Even in the absence of conscious manipulation they can give rise to inter-communal suspicions, rejection and violence. We need to understand their sources if we are to put in the hands of people who harbor these manipulable weaknesses the means of coming to terms with them, recognizing their own vulnerability to such manipulation and bringing it within their own more enlightened control.

That usually means leaving the issues of malice, the judging and the punishment of malice to others, though naturally none of us can simply prescind from them. But the tasks are different, and best pursued separately. Only at our peril will we neglect building the strength of communities to resist manipulation, and even those of us most motivated to fight injustice are as tempted as others to see our task as judging and punishing rather than building those strengths.

These guide-lines had already gained importance for me in working with the African-American civil rights cause in the United States of the '50s and '60s, in working for the safety of the Rastafarian community in Jamaica at the time (1965-'67) of their worst victimization, in working with war-resistance groups in the United States during Vietnam, when I was less interested in the striking gesture of moral judgment than in promoting, particularly among the defenders of the war, a self-understanding of their own pathology and the pits they were digging for themselves.

Bringing all of this to my own first serious mediating ventures in Northern Ireland, beginning in 1972, I quickly came to a recognition that those engaged in the direct violence on either side were not the psychopaths they were generally accounted to be by those who felt more righteous than they, but had in most cases joined the various militant groups out of good-faith commitment to the safety and interests of their own communities, and that the conflicting passions, grievances and fears of the communal groups had roots that one could deal with.

In a 1977 article on the Northern Ireland conflict I first used, in published form, the **Four-Factor Theory** which has since proven its utility to me in working with many other communal conflicts.² The theory, as analytic tool, really requires that it be used only in close actual observation of the psychological dynamic of a particular conflict, an effort to get inside the skin of the participants and to understand their dilemmas as they themselves experience them. As with most other theory, we can do incalculable damage

²Raymond G. Helmick, S.J., "Church Structure and Violence in Northern Ireland," *The Month*, London, August 1977, pp. 273-276.

if we try to cram other people's horrors within the boxes of our preconceptions. Hence my preference to present it in very concrete form, as I did in that article. The basis of the theory, though, in abstracted form, can be stated as follows.

When, in a clash between majority and minority groups, the conflict is taken *in its own terms*, i.e., strictly as a confrontation between them, the process is much like a ruthless business deal: I get so much, you get so much; I get everything I can take from you, you get only what I cannot take from you.

The result is that every change of status means a further embitterment of the conflict, not a reconciliation or healing. Before long, we regularly hear the conclusion, familiar to anyone who has followed a number of these conflicts: *there is no solution*.

The more proper conclusion is that *some other factors than the direct confrontation* must be considered if there is to be reconciliation or healing. I habitually look for *three* such additional factors: the *internal state of the majority party*, the *internal state of the minority*, and a *framework*.

A supposition here is that *scapegoating* is fundamental to the conflict. *This is not always true*. There are conflicts brought about simply because one side chooses deliberately to exploit the other and disregard its rights. That is a reason why this theory cannot be imposed arbitrarily on anyone's conflict, but its applicability needs to be tested. As a generalization, however, it is always worth testing out the hypothesis that the

minority suffers at the hands of the majority not because of anything it does itself but because the majority has need of a scapegoat.

By this hypothesis, the most aggressive and bothersome minority is quite safe so long as the majority is contented within itself. When the majority has some trouble of conscience that involves a sense of *guilt*, a minority is in danger, and will be accused of all kinds of misdeeds, regardless of how harmless and inoffensive it may be in fact.³ The attack is made because of the majority's bad conscience.

1. The *internal state of the Majority*, therefore, is the first factor that needs to be examined. The sense of guilt, always an oppressive condition, calls for *punishment*, and the guilt-ridden have always known that it is more convenient to punish someone else than to take the punishment on oneself, hence the scapegoat.

2. The *internal state of the minority* plays a lesser, but still important role. Having studied this in a great number of conflicts, I have never yet been satisfied that I have an adequate sense of how that role is played out. Two distinct elements in it have long impressed me.

³We all know instances, of course, in which a minority of persons holds the fate of larger numbers, or a whole community, in its power. It may even be typical, if we see the reins of power normally held by an elite even within a majority community. My terms "majority" and "minority" are terms of convenience. In a case like *apartheid* South Africa, where an actual minority dominated, we can speak of a "power majority" and "power minority."

a. Minorities have a sense of *grievance*, whose content, and the resultant behavior, need to be understood -- again something that cannot be achieved simply by routine application of a theory, but has to be ascertained by attending closely to what is actually going on in the circumstances.

b. Minorities have a tendency to *play the role of victim*, to dramatize it. In many instances, this becomes of itself an *invitation to violence*.⁴

3. Among the factors to be examined, one can of course never leave out the *direct confrontation between the two sides*, taken in its own terms: the element noted first but which, as observed above, will produce no solution if it is the only thing we attend to. To underscore that, I give it only *third place* among the four factors. But the reader will understand how disabling it is if we simply don't know what the quarrel is in its own terms.

4. The final factor is the *framework, the context in which the conflict takes place.*

My late colleague Richard Hauser had spoken of four factors before me, and the theory as I present it now is rather much a joint effort between us. I tend to handle the minority state differently than he, but the principal difference between us is the

⁴This victim element is the one that leaves me most puzzled and unsatisfied in my own theory. Padraig O'Malley, in his excellent study of the mentality of the 1981 hunger strikers in the Northern Ireland prison, *Biting at the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strikes and the Politics of Despair* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1990), raises this question more interestingly than anyone else I have read on it, but in my own estimation he too fails to draw satisfactory conclusions from it. I would like to understand its workings better.

framework. Richard had worked at the American civil rights cause for a period, providing training programs to people in the Southern Leadership Conference, and first developed the four-factor idea at that time. In that context, he saw that the whole American issue was played out in terms of *constitutional law*, especially of the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, which rejected the old "separate but equal" concept of Black and White opportunities, and prohibited racial segregation in schools. Richard concluded that the law was always the framework, the context within which conflict took place.

This would not hold for me, when I looked at such a conflict as South Africa, where the law had been reduced to a wholly owned subsidiary of one side, and was used as a weapon in that side's armory, as it is in many other conflicts, Northern Ireland's among them. It cannot then be the context for the whole. Looking for an alternative framework, I eventually settled on *group identification*, the answer members of the group will give to the question, "Who are *we*?" That could be the identity principle for Americans, at least for the dominant white community in the United States, for whom the concept of being "a nation of laws, not of men," for whom not a Sovereign but the written Constitution itself is the bond of unity within the nation, provides that answer to the question, "Who are *we*?" But it is not necessarily the same for others, who are likely to respond: "That is *your* law, not ours." The framework always belongs to the dominant group.

This group identity concept of the framework proved distinctly helpful in the Northern Ireland case. The group identification was not obvious, and had to be culled out by intensive experience of the inner landscape of both communal groups, Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist.

I came to a realization that Protestantism as such, or the Union with Great Britain for that matter, was not the group identity principle for the Protestant/Unionist community. Instead it was a feeling that the group was the primary carrier of the concept of *democracy* -- never mind Greece, never mind Switzerland. Protestants in Northern Ireland, asked to define their democracy, would resort at once to the idea of *majority rule*, but in fact this was merely a blind. Majority rule was for them an instrument for suppressing their minority. But the real democracy principle that they had so deeply internalized, over many generations, that it was their communal answer to the question, "Who are we?", was that *the good society was one which upheld the rights of dissenting, non-conformist minorities*.

The concept had its roots in the Puritan revolution of the 17th century and the Cromwellian Commonwealth, where these terms had a more sharply technical meaning -- dissenters, non-conformists -- than since. It is even a pre-institutional concept of democracy, and from a period in which the word "democracy" itself would not have been chosen for it.⁵

⁵ It is not even the definition I would choose myself for democracy. For me, "democracy" means a society in which every institution of government, or for that matter any other form of institutional power in the society, is held to *public accountability*. I am aware of how, even in those of our societies that account themselves most democratic, the public has little appetite for actually reading the accounts, and how well

The Protestants of Northern Ireland have not in fact lived up to this definition of their own identity. The true dissenting, non-conformist minority in their midst is of course the Catholics, whose rights they have flagrantly violated. There is a readily intelligible reason for that: their *anxiety* about this group, which they regard as *incapable of democracy* in the sense in which they have defined it. Not far off the mark, as it was hard to see any sense in which the Catholic militants had given serious regard to the rights and needs of the Protestant community there up to the time of their cease-fire in 1994. At that point, their reason for seeking a non-violent strategy was explicitly their recognition that they must have a society fit for both of the Irish traditions. What the Protestants saw, though, was a Catholic community so dominated by their clergy that they were incapable of independent decision.

But the Protestants were guilt-ridden over this failure to live their own self-concept. It is the tragedy of their situation that they lived so long under "Direct Rule," without the traditional institutions of elective democracy which they see as their gift to the world. Those who governed them under "Direct Rule," right up to the date, May 8, 2007, when they were finally able to implement the "Good Friday Agreement" of 1997,

the elected officials in our democracies recognize that, once elected, their next task is to insulate themselves, to the greatest extent they are able, from public accountability. That is in fact the measure of accountability's importance. A society which is as protective of minority rights as the Ulster folk would have it is, in my view, the *free society*, likewise an ideal.

When I have described this Irish Protestant ideal of the society that protects the rights of dissenting non-conformist minorities to friends in Lebanon, they have responded immediately that that is their own most urgent need.

This paper makes little use of Lebanon in its examples. But since the interests of the Conference so prominently include the different national interpretations of shared history, It should include some reference to the classic book on this subject, than which I know no other as enlightening: Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (University of California Press, 1988).

were accountable only to Westminster, not in any serious way to the Northern Irish themselves. This awareness of failure in the terms most important to their own identity was the guilt that had to be expiated by the punishment of a scapegoat.

A few observations about this drastic conclusion:

1. Why a scapegoat rather than themselves? It is because this defect is so dreadful that it is inadmissible. As such it is the object of *denial*, in the sense that psychologists would use. For that reason, it opens up another entire field of inquiry that is a sub-set of this kind of analysis: that of *ambivalence*.

In briefest terms, this is a condition that occurs when there is *cognitive dissonance* between those beliefs that the group members feel they must hold as *tests of communal loyalty* and their own experience. The admission of doubt on the loyalty tests is a matter of betrayal. Individuals deeply committed to the defense of their own community and its values can get to a point where the balance between the communal loyalty test beliefs – stereotypes, of course – and their own observation is 51%/49%, and the tension is so high that it likely results in violence. The first target of the violence will be those whose existence is a challenge to the group beliefs. They are to be attacked, removed, if need be killed to end the challenge. Still more threatening, however, is anyone of one's own side who harbors and validates these forbidden doubts. These are the perceived traitors, and will be more readily objects of violence even than the enemy. There is yet a more frightful representative of prohibited doubt about the certainties of one's own identity

group, and that is oneself, if the doubt is allowed to become mastering. I am sure I have seen what were represented to be heroic deaths in these contexts, persons placing themselves in the most extreme danger in demonstrative defense of their identity groups, which were actually suicides, to destroy the doubt in themselves.

2. The potential for violence in these situations is greatest where the internal discomfort of the majority group, what I have described as the "First Factor" in this form of analysis, coincides most rigorously with the "framework" identity principle, the "Fourth Factor." A group can be internally uncomfortable about relatively trivial things, and blame them on a minority scapegoat without feeling urged to do much damage. But when the subject of internal guilt is something so important as the very matter that defines the group's identity, then the offense and the consequent tension are at their most extreme, and the resulting violence will be the greatest.

3. The group identity which provides the "framework" for a conflict between two such groups as we have been describing is not common to the two. It is the identity of the *majority*, or of the dominant group. The minority group may very well not share it.

4. Observe, that this is not a matter of psychopathy, or of discreditable intention on the part of the majority group that launches the violence. The way a group defines its own identity is normally rather flattering to themselves. We will not define ourselves in terms of what we regard as our worst qualities. Instead the group's sensed identity will be the expression of its highest idealism. As such, it may in some cases be self-deception, a

hyperbolic sense of the group's possibilities, a lure into irreality, though we should not too readily draw that conclusion. People are not really fools.

There is a clear psychological dynamic to a conflict that originates in the way described here: a dominant group scapegoating a minority as the result of a sense of guilt, which in turn arises from failure to meet the group's own idealized expectations of itself, the framework definition of its own identity. We could divide this into any arbitrary number of successive steps, but I am in the habit of summarizing it in three steps:

1. *Denial.* Simply declare that none of what one actually knows to be true is true in fact. This was conspicuously observable in the Northern Ireland case I have described. It had always been the habit of the Catholics to say that their problem was the British, and the solution the removal of the British. It had equally been the habit of the Protestants (and of the British) to say the problem was the IRA, and the solution the removal of the IRA.

These were violent propositions in either case. They were also ways of denying what everyone knew was the true problem, namely that two communities of people were living in the same space and had not learned how that is done in mutual respect for one another.

Denial excused both sides from dealing with the known problem. The first instinct of the Unionist community was to deny that the Catholics really wanted the

things they said they wanted. The trouble, in their mind, was all the fault of perverse "men of violence," who were unrepresentative of their own community and motivated only by malice.

2. The denial basically turns out to be untrue, as everyone actually knew beforehand. When it does not work, resort is had to the second step, *repression*. In the Northern Ireland case, this could be seen in the various forms of discrimination over all the years from 1920, restricting access to housing, employment and the vote as ways of demonstrating to the Catholic population that the country was not really theirs at all, encouraging their emigration, and reinforcing that message with a politically organized and motivated police.

3. If repression is also unsuccessful, the dynamic of the situation leads on to the outright removal or destruction of the offending people, a *genocide*. In Northern Ireland it never came to that, but pogroms, the burning out of the residents of whole neighborhoods, were frequent and the threat of more drastic rampages always present.

What is noteworthy is, again, that these increasing levels of violence and brutality arise not out of any fundamental baseness of character, but out of guilt over the failure of the most generous impulses of the community.

I have referred to the anxieties and resentments of the majority community, in Northern Ireland the Protestant/Unionists, and of course, in the terms of the theory, those

should be characteristics of a minority. This is the key to a phenomenon, conspicuous in Ireland, which is very likely another quite common attribute of this genre of communal conflict, namely the *Double Minority*.

Once, in Israel, I drew, for a very peace-minded friend, a sketch I often draw, showing the four factors as two angry figures, one larger, one smaller, contending with each other within a frame. The Israeli responded that he would show me what was wrong with that picture, and drew in a still larger and more menacing figure outside the box, who represented the threat of the wider Arab world that hung over the conflict of Israeli (the majority) and Palestinian (the minority). The sketch, as he redrew it, was just about as I was accustomed to do it myself to illustrate the *Double Minority*.

In Ireland, Protestants are a majority in the North, but a minority in Ireland as a whole. They are never allowed to forget that, and they show all the symptoms of minority grievance and anxiety, and the dangerous tendency to play the victim as well. The Catholics, too, minority within Northern Ireland, are very conscious of being majority in the island as a whole, and of holding an ultimate kind of power over the Protestant population. And just as both sides have their (minority) grievances and victim syndrome, so too the Catholics have their own (majority) framework, their own guilts, and their own psychological dynamic, going through a very similar progression of steps in the violence of the conflict.

For Catholics in the Ireland of the years of conflict, Irish Nationalism, in my observation, turned out not to be the determining element of group identity, despite all the revival of the old language, the Irish games and dances. They were not the answer to the "Who are we?" question. Instead it was Catholicism itself, but sensed in a very watered-down, generic fashion that we would more properly identify as generally Christian. Such people's sense of who they were was an amalgam of "generous," "tolerant," and a number of similar qualities that were summed up as "the Catholics," even though it would be difficult to distinguish this as "Catholic" from many other catalogues of traits. One thing they distinctly did not want to hear was that "Catholic" in their Irish setting meant priest-ridden, clerically dominated. This was the subject of denial as strong as the Protestants' denial that they were in any way deficient in their living out of "democracy" in the sense they had internalized as their self-definition. There was a strong dose of the anti-clerical feeling that one would expect to go with this sort of domination, especially conspicuous in more recent years as the burden of clerical domination has been thrown off, but no admissions that would be damaging to self-esteem.

With this sense of their majority position in the whole of Ireland, complete with their own framework self-definition, they had consequently their own internal conflict and guilt syndrome, tied as closely to their own sense of identity as the Protestant's was to theirs. A very similar dynamic ensues:

1. *Denial*. There was a rhetoric denying the reality of Protestant/Unionist distinctiveness or grievance, or their right to preserve their own tradition. "Sure, they're all Irish anyway. They ought to start acting like it."

2. *Repression*. Like the Protestant denial of Catholic grievance, Catholic denial of Protestant grievance was untrue and unsuccessful in stamping out the challenge. The repression stage, moderated use of force and coercion, could be seen in their case in the IRA's repeated terrorist campaigns of low-level violence.

3. *Genocide*: the urge, if not the act, to wipe out or remove the offending community. Just as it never quite came to this from the Protestant side in Northern Ireland (though it was often threatened), from the Catholic side genocide was not really a practicable proposition. The Catholics, whether of the North or of the whole of Ireland, hadn't the military strength or the equipment to carry out such a barbarity. But the rhetoric was there: "If they don't like it here, they should go back to Britain!" Protestants knew it so well that they had their response ready: "This is Britain!"

I have spelled this through at some length to illustrate the use of an analytic tool that has its value not only in analyzing but in mediating communal conflicts of a generic type. One can approach other conflicts with these tools -- provided only that the analysis really be empirical, and not a cramming of people's conflict into arbitrary theoretical categories.

The Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Palestinian conflict gains clarity from such analysis. In a paper I worked through several version from the late 1970s through the early 1980s, I saw the self-identifying framework of the world Jewish community and also the specifically Israeli community as predicated not on religion nor on particular political ideologies of left or right, but rather on being "the people of the holocaust." That communal self-concept involved a corollary, expressed as "never again!" But this corollary itself then diverged into two sometimes conflicting, sometimes complementary versions: never again to us, never again to anyone.

The more generous version could be seen operating spontaneously in Jewish and specifically Israeli response to the genocide of Bosnians, which people saw in terms of repeating the holocaust events. A little less sharply, but visibly enough, the same response was evidenced when the Iraqi Kurds came under genocidal attack in 1991. But in Israel itself, or in the occupied Palestinian territories, when it comes to a question of another people finding themselves in a victim position in relation to themselves, the response is denial and deeply internalized guilt. It stands out conspicuously, as denial symptom, when we see how outraged people become if the treatment of Palestinians is ever compared to the holocaust, even when it is a matter of the most extreme fringe groups, a Baruch Goldstein, a Meir Kahane or, in our own time, an Avigdor Liebermann or other such advocates of the violent removal -- the accepted euphemism is "transfer" -- of the whole population.

And yet, this self-definition as "people of the holocaust" is no longer universal currency for Jews or Israelis. Perhaps it never was for Sephardic Jews, who had a different historical experience which they now highlight and cultivate. I have found that my own Jewish students, when they read versions of my older papers on the subject, say that that is not their own self-definition, though it may be that of their elders. They are of a generation further removed from the holocaust. (Their elders are in many cases horrified at what they see in them as forgetfulness.)

Conflicts may be more evenly balanced, so that it becomes arbitrary to assign the roles of majority/minority, dominant/subject to the parties. At this point, the observation of framework/identity factors, of internal conflict and scapegoating may still prove validly useful analytic tools. And the situation may more directly resemble the Double Minority scenario described above for the Northern Irish, where each side has its (majority) internal stresses and guilts, its (minority) grievances and victim consciousness, and its own framework identity values.

Larger conflicts, too, lend themselves to this kind of analysis. During the Cold War we saw a readiness on both sides to demonize and visit incalculable – genocidal – destruction on the other. This relied on vigorously propagandized definitions of self-identity and, on both sides, horrible suspicions that the other side's indictment of their own inhumanity might have a basis in truth (guilt!). The Westerners were very sure that the whole Soviet and Communist system was a debasement of human rights and liberty, an intolerable tyranny, evil incarnate. And they tended to identify all the persons of the

East Bloc as "the Commies," "the Reds." They could all be attacked, destroyed, obliterated without compunction.⁶ For the Easterners, the West (envisioned as "Capitalism" rather than as the "Democracy" that was the West's concept of itself) meant only exploitation, ruthless dehumanization, whether of its own workers and peons or of the peoples of the "Third World." Everyone knew just how hypocritical it was to count the dictators, torturers and exploiters of South Africa, the Philippines, Central America or others of the West's unsavory allies among the "Defenders of Democracy." However frustrating life under Communist rule might be, people knew that the Capitalist monster deserved no pity.

These pathologies were in fact well enough recognized that the two sides, in some of their saner moments, cultivated the policies of "peaceful coexistence" and cultural exchange. The numbers from either bloc who could actually come into humanizing contact with real persons of the other side was always small, but we all understood the importance of the effort.

On both sides, there was always a nagging suspicion that the worst the others said about themselves might also be true. And that guilt engendered denial syndromes with their own needs for scapegoats. At moments of crisis, when anxiety over the scale of destruction available to each side reached its peaks, this fueled the danger of preemptive strikes and was institutionalized in such policy responses as Mutually Assured Destruction, MAD.

⁶ It came as a shock when we heard candidate Hillary Clinton, in a weak moment in the heat of her campaign, declare that, if the Iranians were seriously to threaten Israel, the U.S. would "obliterate" them.

It happens, of course, that some conflicts are nothing other than the cynical grasping of a more powerful group at the goods of another, whom they are able to rob. That seems to have been the rather normal character of the ruthless exploitation in several Latin American countries, and especially in Central America over the decades of the Cold War. This was South Africa under *apartheid*, and there is no lack of other ready examples. In these cases, my Four-Factor theory offers little or nothing of use, and there is no point in fussing over the moral scruples, denials and vulnerabilities of people who are merely ruthless. It is still better not to presume that moral analysis has nothing to offer until that is proven.

In the case of the Lebanon conflict, with which I have been heavily concerned since 1982, I found that the kaleidoscopic variety of factions -- everyone in minorities, everyone helpless before the scale of events -- made the sheer mathematics of trying to sort out the four factors for all those sides impracticable. The insights into scapegoating, guilt, denial etc., not as doctrines but as factors worth exploring, remained as valuable as ever.

We could extend this catalogue indefinitely. But the whole Four-Factor theory is of little interest if it can produce only analysis and no guidelines for acting to resolve these conflicts. It should be evident enough that it does that too, and in my own practice I have never been hesitant to offer a menu of quite concrete options to the conflicting sides. It is always an advantage that working with this theory, or this sort of tools, does not

involve taking sides with one faction against another, much as it leaves us free to identify manipulative or malicious operatives. The most useful lesson for myself, in any such work, has been that offering friendship to one side in a conflict need not involve becoming the enemy of the other, that one can be the friend of both, working for their reconciliation, and that in fact once the third-party outsider has taken one side against the other his usefulness as mediator is gone.

Can this manner of proceeding, then, be useful in the sort of conflict we have seen since 9/11, with the “one remaining Superpower” as mighty and dangerous protagonist? Surely we are faced with loyalty tests on all sides: the American President proclaims of all the world that they are “with us or against us.” Surely there is guilt, and an uneasy denial of guilt. The rest of the world has, for most of our American history, seen the United States as beacon of justice and freedom and all the good things, but hardly sees us now as such. We prefer not to examine any reasons why this is so, but prefer blaming and punishing those who feel or act out their anger at us. And our vengeance can be more terrible than any that has been seen before in ages of more primitive technology.

Earlier I spoke of *ambivalence* and *denial* as essential elements in the psychological dynamic of the conflicts discussed here. They generate violence, and for that reason there is always danger in any kind of dealing with them. The steps subsequent to the denial in the typical dynamic I have described, repression and ultimately genocide, are simply protection for the denial itself, whether denial of one's

own doubts or of the reality that is right before one's face, and the protection of that denial can be ferocious.

As much as ambivalence and denial are the source of violence, however, recognition of the things one has been so anxious to deny is the most effective single healer of these conflicts. In consequence, bringing to the surface the things that cannot be admitted or discussed is the most important thing that the mediator or reconciler can do. The danger of simply inflaming the situation and unleashing worse or more violence has always, still, to be the measure of this work, and means have to be devised to release people from their denials and ambivalence, making the forbidden topic something that can be raised and discussed with ease, without provoking violence. The physician's Hypocratic principle is involved here: do no harm.

Any of this work involves working with groups, in many cases large communal groups, and it is the same work, essentially, as psychologists do in therapy sessions. My experience in discussing it with psychologists has been that they are usually very apprehensive about doing this with a group of such size that it can be called a public. They do their therapeutic work, whether with individuals or with smaller groups, *in a room*, in a setting where they have control. They are conscious enough of the volatility of such therapeutic situations that they are reluctant to see them happen outside the area of maximum control. I know no substitute for it, however, and measure the dangers of challenging the denials and ambivalence of groups against the manifest danger of doing nothing. The priority then is for means that minimize that potential for violence.

None of these is more beneficial than creating opportunities for experiencing the others in their real humanity, and not as stereotypes. Limited opportunities for just a few individuals to meet each other in this way do not suffice. Difficult as it is, an identity group *as a whole* needs to experience the humanity of the group they have scapegoated, that they fear or see as enemy, to acknowledge them in their humanity and their rights, to recognize them as different, and entitled to the integrity of their difference, but equal.

Reverting, then, to the smaller communal conflicts of the '90s, the cease-fires that blossomed so unexpectedly in Northern Ireland in 1994 were experiences of that sort. The process originated within the Nationalist/Republican community, as a recognition, many years in the making, that the Protestant/Unionist population, people they did not know other than as adversaries, were a community whose right to be themselves had to be respected, that consequently it was not only impracticable but a basic injustice to try to coerce them into a new relationship. Reconciliation with them had to be *won*, by gaining their trust. Some ambivalence and hesitation remained in this group decision, but the case was made with great care and effort by individuals who had earned the trust of the group and had, at great risk to themselves, reconsidered the whole position of Irish Republicanism and persuaded the actual (i.e., military) decision-makers to go along with their new understanding.

On the Protestant/Unionist side, that proposition was soon understood by those, the "Loyalists," who had themselves taken part in violent militant organizations. After

some initial heart-searching, their cease-fire followed that of the Republicans by some six weeks, and they remained faithful to it and its insights even under the extreme provocation of the IRA's terminating its own cease-fire. It was the main-line political Unionists, who had had no part in producing the cease-fires or the new opportunities, who were most hesitant; understandably enough, as they had no way of predicting how any process of communication with the opposite community would come out. In their apprehension about any sort of talk, they worked over a long period only for delay, creating any excuse they could imagine to postpone action. British government judged that they needed their delay, and consistently covered for them, giving them excuses not to confront the problem they most needed to confront.

The Oslo agreement between Israel and the PLO gives even more striking an illustration of this moment of mutual recognition of peoples who had previously denied one another's legitimacy as peoples. It was the leadership groups who took that decision on both sides of course, they themselves with apprehension and some visible signs of reluctance, and it was from the start a question how far they could bring their publics along with them. There were people on either side who felt only suspicion of a process that granted this recognition without nailing down the final terms of a settlement in advance, and their skepticism has remained a volatile danger to the conclusion of an accord ever since. Those who most virulently opposed the peace, or concessions, or recognition of the humanity of the other side, understood quite well that their task was to destroy their enemies' confidence in peace with themselves, and they attacked the process of reconciliation itself with the most extravagant violence within their reach. It is easy to

measure the prospect of success in achieving a peace by the extent to which the wider public of either side sees the other as people capable of a peace, and understands the need for the other's basic requirements and aspirations, not only their own, to be met if the peace is to be genuine.

What then of our own (American) sorry dealings with the peoples of the Middle East in this more recent time of our fury and panic. We have witnessed terrible violence, and it has not come only from our enemies, the “terrorists.” We have consistently refused to deal with those we detest and seek to marginalize and destroy. Mired in this Middle Eastern conflict, feared and resisted by much of the rest of the world, we do not seek to communicate with those who could best change the things we most want changed, but rather treat communicating with us as a privilege which we should accord only to those who are well behaved, i.e., who conform to our wishes. We will not talk with Syria. We will not talk with Iran. We will not talk with Hamas or Hezbollah. We will not talk with Cuba or North Korea or Venezuela. Sooner or later one has to ask: who is isolated, or who is losing opportunities?

I have kept approaching, distantly, our present world of vast and endless conflict through the looking glass of the smaller conflicts of the recent past. Let us look for a final moment at the momentous Israeli-Palestinian conflict, so many decades long. For several of those decades, a very few of us ventured to talk to the PLO, the very people Israel and the United States are so anxious to talk to now, and found that there were openings to indicate that they were not only open to but seeking possibilities of peace.

Over those decades it was prohibited by law that any official of the U.S. government should have any contact whatever with any official of the PLO. For Israelis, this was prohibited to any citizen, and those who violated the prohibition were jailed. As a result, those decades of time were wasted, the conflict reduced to total stalemate because the adversaries could not speak to one another.

Imagine what would have happened if Israelis – and Americans – had been talking to the PLO all that time. Israel and the Palestinians would long since have made their peace with one another. There would be no Hamas. There would be no Hezbollah. Lebanon would not have been invaded, -- in 1978, in 1982, in 1993, in 1996 or in the summer of 2006. The peoples not only of the Middle East but of the rest of the world, and of the United States, would have been spared much misery, much squandering of their resources, many needless deaths. We could be paying our attention to the more genuine problems of poverty and hunger and disease and living in an altogether more caring world.