Ritual and the Politics of Reconciliation

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If you ask most political scientists and international relations scholars what role reconciliation should play in peace processes, you are apt to receive a dazed look and perhaps an uneasy silence as well. The reason for this reaction is that political scientists think about peacemaking among large collective entities and see reconciliation as concerning personal relations or religious experiences for individuals and small face-to-face groups.

Peacemaking, from this perspective, is about developing new patterns of behavior built on institutions and practices that reward the parties for desirable behavior and punish them for unwanted actions. Nowhere is this perspective more apparent than in the work of post-World War II European integration (see, for example, Deutsch et al., 1957; Haas, 1964; Lindberg and Shingold, 1973). The founders of the European Community were uninterested in wanting to construct functional linkages between the economies of the major European countries such that the rewards for cooperation and the costs of conflict would continue to grow. Building an integrated Europe meant emphasizing future benefits while making an implicit comparison with the high costs of past conflict. That is not to say there were no overt efforts at reconciliation in postwar Europe. There were, especially between France and Germany, although they are generally viewed as far less
This distinction between interest and identity approaches to conflict is useful in examining reconciliation. It is seen in Gardner-Feldman’s (1999) differentiation between moral and instrumental reconciliation and in Bar-Tal’s discussion of the different dynamics of reconciliation in intrastate and interstate conflicts. In the former, Bar-Tal points out, there will be more emphasis on reconstructing past acts of injustice “in order to foster social healing” (2000: 356), whereas intrastate reconciliation is more concerned with building new relationships through institutions and practices that address the parties’ interests. Although the language of interest and identity approaches and the actions that follow from each are often quite different, I argue that effective conflict management needs to address both competing interests and incompatible identities (Ross, 1993a). The distinction between the two is analytic, and for people involved in conflict the two are often merged. For example, although claims to land clearly have a material basis, they are often especially important to a group because of the symbolic significance of such claims. This means that the analytically meaningful distinction between moral and instrumental reconciliation should not obscure the fact that in practice reconciliation must include both, although the mix in particular cases will vary. Gardner-Feldman (1999) compares German-Israeli with German-French reconciliation and observes that whereas the former focuses on moral concerns, the latter has been more instrumental. Rarely, however, is reconciliation just one or the other. The interrelationship between the two is crucial in cases of reconciliation where the goal is not just to connect former adversaries emotionally but to build institutions and practices to meet their instrumental needs as well.

Finally, I am interested in how in intense conflicts, culture is a powerful vehicle for expressing social and political differences, and in how these tensions and anger that conflicts unleash mobilize communities on sectarian lines. As a result, cultural expressions such as parades, religious sites and practices, public art and monuments (as well as their destruction), holidays, archetypical findings and their public presentation, modes of dress, or language use can easily become emotionally charged and politically divisive (Ross, 2004). But such expressions can also be powerful vehicles for narrowing differences between opponents. At the same time that all groups are ready to define external enemies, all cultural traditions also contain core images of peace, which can then be adapted to deescalation and reconciliation (Gopin, 2009). The concepts of psychocultural interpretations and psychocultural dramas help us examine conflicts that invoke core cultural images and group identity and to consider reconciliation as acknowledgment through symbolic expression and ritual.
which, like culture, has been relatively neglected by political scientists (Ross, 1997, 2000).1

What Is Meant by Reconciliation and Who Is to Be Reconciled?

Reconciliation involves changing the relationship between parties in conflict both instrumentally and emotionally in a more positive direction so that each can more easily envision a joint future. Reconciliation is not one thing (Kriesberg, 1992a) and is best viewed as a constellation, meaning that there can be degrees of reconciliation rather than just its presence or absence; furthermore, there are strong differences in the transformation in the relationship between former opponents; in the weak version there is sufficient change so that interactions between the groups are increasingly constructive and violence comes to an end.

One issue that arises when discussing ethico-political conflict in general, and reconciliation in particular, is the naming of groups in ways that imply they are unified actors when most often that is far from the case. For example, in Northern Ireland, Israel-Palestine, and Sri Lanka there are severe within-group differences that have significant bearing on between-group behavior. On some occasions, in fact, it is easier to build cross-group coalitions than within-group ones. Often, however, within-group dynamics limit and even dictate between-group actions. When maintaining support from one’s own group is problematic, intragroup actions will often be hostile and aggressive. This is clearly seen in the civil war arena where, in polarized polities, political parties are generally organized on ethnic lines and fewer vote for parties associated with another group (Horowitz, 1985). As a result, intragroup competition determines who represents the group in intergroup situations in ways that can significantly constrain intergroup peacemaking and reconciliation, including the symbolic gestures that leaders, and even ordinary people, in one group can make toward an opposing group.

Goals of Reconciliation

There are several ways to think about the goals of reconciliation. One framework emphasizes the role of reconciliation in different stages of a conflict. During the peacemaking (or preagreement) stage, partial reconciliation can be critical in getting the parties to the negotiating table and persuading them that there are people on the other side worth talking to and things worth talking about with them (Kelman, 1978, 1987; Kohman, 1992). Much of the field of conflict resolution is focused on creating the conditions under which formal agreements between disputants can be negotiated and reached (Ross, 2003b). The argument is that without significant reconciliation, long-term enemies will never get to the table. During the peacemaking phase, the reconciliation process emphasizes identity and recognition as prerequisites for instrumental action. Preagreement reconciliation begins the transformation of an enemy into a future neighbor by helping the parties imagine that coexistence is possible and by creating images of the benefits of such coexistence. Often this process is difficult because in polarized societies, many people have trouble imagining the details of day-to-day existence without the familiar threats and fears. Indeed such fears, periodically reinforced through actual events, play a dominant role in group memory and limit the capacity to offer symbolic gestures of reconciliation lest they be viewed as signs of weakness and lack of resolve.

During the peace-building, or postsettlement, phase the task of reconciliation is more ambitious, addressing further questions associated with the institutions and practices to be established. Even though formal agreements have been reached between the leaders of conflicting groups, their full implementation requires significant changes in public attitudes and behaviors. Such transformative steps, which clearly will vary across contexts, are emotionally critical for building future functional cooperation. At this phase reconciliation is multistaged, engaging both political elites and the mass public, and involves a wide range of specific actions—as evidenced by the diverse goals that truth commissions tend to address (Minow, 1998; 88).

Reconciliation can vary depending on who is to be reconciled and on the vision of peace that the parties hold. In intrastate conflicts, groups can have very different goals ranging from integration as in South Africa; pluralism as in Northern Ireland, to separation as in Sri Lanka and Israel-Palestine.1 Each of these is associated with different patterns of peacemaking and reconciliation, including the symbolic gestures that leaders, and even ordinary people, in one group can make toward an opposing group.
Discussions of reconciliation in Central and Latin America emphasize its importance as a prerequisite for democratic regimes that arise after years or even decades of civil war and military rule (Kaye, 1997; Hayner, 1999). From this perspective, reconciliation has two main components: partial truth telling in order to acknowledge past injustices, and acceptance of both democratic rules and procedures and the political representations of former opponents. Postsettlements have been carried out in a number of countries (for example, Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti) and sometimes for addressing socio-economic inequalities at the root of the earlier conflict.

Is Reconciliation Necessary for Peacemaking or Peacebuilding?

It would be hard to argue that peacemaking following either domestic or international conflicts requires formal reconciliation processes, since in the past there have been many civil and interstate wars that have ended without reconciliation in which the former enemies have been able to live peacefully for some time thereafter. One explanation for this is that until the nineteenth century the separation between state and society was sufficiently great so that ethnic and state identities were not particularly relevant to the politics of states. In addition, many wars end with a victor and a vanquished party, and for strategic reasons the latter accepts its status.

International Conflict and Reconciliation Processes

Because of differences between civil and interstate conflicts, it is plausible that there may be differences in the dynamics of reconciliation in each situation. In interstate wars even if there is not a clear winner and loser, treaties or cease-fires that end wars often do little more than establish "normal relations" between the states. Even when these events are accompanied by apologies or admissions of guilt, such as the German admission of responsibility for World War I in the Treaty of Versailles or the United States’ 1968 apology that its ship the Pueblo had violated North Korea's waters, the process often only involves leaders who are seen as acting out of instrumental concerns or weakness.

In the international arena, the most sustained reconciliation efforts in recent decades have been between Germany and Japan and their former enemies in the aftermath of World War II. Japan has issued statements to South Korea, the United States, and China in this sense. However, in some cases the expressions of regret fell short of the full apologies that were sought or were only individual statements by leaders. There have been sustained German reconciliation efforts with France, Poland, Israel, and the Czech Republic, and payments of reparations to victims of their states in other parts of Europe as well (Handl, 1997; Kopstein, 1997; Dodds, 1999; Gartner-Feldman, 1999).

Although German-French and German-Israeli reconciliation has been significant in recent decades, it is not clear that this model is easy to generalize to other interstate, let alone intra-state, conflicts. For one thing, the nearly universal condemnation of the Nazi regime removes much of the difficulty associated with deciding who were the perpetrators and who were the victims. Second, although the postwar German governments have chosen to acknowledge German responsibility for the war, the German officials who have done so do not see themselves as the natural heirs of the earlier regime. Third, the incentives for German reconciliation efforts were strong, without such efforts, Germany's acceptance into the international system as well as support for its economy would have been problematic. Some Germans certainly were highly motivated for moral reasons as well to seek reconciliation with peoples who had suffered under the Nazis— as when, in 1970, Chancellor Willy Brandt fell to his knees at the site of the Warsaw Ghetto and expressed Germany's guilt, sorrow, and responsibility. The particular conditions and incentives at work in the cases of postwar German reconciliation are, however, too often missing in intrastate (and even other international) conflicts to make this model relevant in many settings. Reconciliation as, in fact, difficult to achieve, as is evident from the story of Czech-German reconciliation during the 1990s. On the one hand, Czechs blamed Germany for their suffering during the war; on the other, because ethnic Germans were expelled from part of Czechoslovakia, the Sudetenland, at the end of the war, this is one of the few wars where Germans saw themselves as victims and demanded apology and reparations. Czech President Havel addressed the issue in 1990, saying it was appropriate that Czechoslovakia set the record straight with its neighbors: Yet despite a strong desire on both sides to put the matter to rest, the issue dragged on for seven years before the two governments issued a joint declaration that was then endorsed by both parliaments. Even though the refugees had been vigorously and successfully
integrated into German society, they (and their descendants) very much wanted a statement that past injustice had been done and that as expelled persons they had a right to return and a right to property that had been expropriated in 1945. The Czechs for their part, while willing to say that the expulsions had been wrong, wanted the Germans to take responsibility for the upheaval in the region that produced the action. They also knew that far of the expellees would want to return, and the Czechs were totally unwilling to restore property after 50 years. In the end, Czech desire to be admitted to European organizations, and Chancello Kohl’s desire to end the matter, led to negotiations that pro-
duced a final document despite much difference and even bitterness over the wording (Hand, 1993; Kopstein, 1993).

Although initially many expected this case to be a relatively easy one in which to achieve reconciliation, in the end it turned out to be awkward and contentious. More important, there is little sense that the outcome had much significant impact on the people in either country. Reconciliation, in this case, eased the situation for officials in both governments but hardly produced a major shift in the German-Czech relationship. What this case does offer is the example of joint responsibility. Yet the brief declaration that took years to achieve also showed that efforts to address problematic issues explicitly can sometimes stir up as many problems as they settle. If reconciliation was so difficult in the German-Czech case, we need to recognize that it will be far more difficult in situations where the perceived injustices are more recent, more severe, and where the will to address them is weaker.

RITUAL AND THE POLITICS OF RECONCILIATION

What Does a Political Reconciliation Process Look Like? What Does It Require?

Reconciliation can be examined as both a product and process. A process analysis emphasizes how reconciliation unfolds; analysis of the product considers how the parties and their relationship change as a result of the process. But what elements of reconciliation should we view as the core of the process, and can we identify the outcome that reconciliation achieves when it is successful?

In a very personal account of reconciliation in which he describes a num-

ber of his own experiences, Lederach (1999) identifies four main features of reconciliation: truth, mercy, justice, and peace. In his view, each of the four is needed for reconciliation, yet there are different ways to combine them. He argues that although reconciliation must address the past, present, and future, this can be done in different ways and in different sequences. Although it is easiest to think in terms of a past-present-future sequence, he shows how in some situations where past trauma is too great, reconciliation is more likely to succeed if it begins either with the present or the future. By addressing the immediate needs of people in a postconflict situation (1999-97-5), or by start-
ing with a vision of building a future that is far more positive than either the immediate past or the present (1997-1997-77), the reconciliation process has a greater chance to succeed.

Long and Brecke (2000) offer a very different emphasis in their recent analysis of reconciliation following civil violence. They argue that the chances for domestic peace increase significantly where there are “reconciliation events” that involve:

(i) direct physical contact or proximity between opponents, usually senior representatives of the respective factions; (ii) a public cere-

mony accompanied by substantial publicity or media attention that relays the event to a wider national society; and (iii) symbolic or sym-

bolic behavior that indicates the parties consider the dispute re-
solved and that more amicable relations are expected to follow.

Their analysis of cases from Latin America (they promise a future analysis of African cases) leads them to conclude that reconciliation is most successful when it entails (i) telling that acknowledges past abuses by all parties. How-

ever, they also conclude that the process almost always needs to be partia-

because of intragroup constraints on the expression of reconciliation gestures and fears about the backlash effects of an unfettered process. The need for both justice and amnesty means that full justice is never meted out through punishment and reparations, although acknowledgment can significantly help victims of violence and the redefinition of social groups and institutions can help prevent future violence. Long and Brecke assert that their evidence sup-
ports what they call the “forgiveness hypothesis,” by which forgiveness is a mecha-
nism for changing shame and anger into empathy and a desire for af-
filiation. They also emphasize the symbolic acknowledgment of past injustice, most often through rendering elaborate accounts of a small number of cases, even when full judicial accountability is not possible.

Apology and Forgiveness

In some religious traditions, reconciliation requires that perpetrators apologize for past harm done and the decision about whether to grant forgiveness is left to victims. Apology contains the admission that past actions were wrong or unjust, and is a way in which groups take responsibility for the past. In some
cases apology is a one-way process, but in many conflicts it must be mutual to be effective. Marty argues that in the Christian tradition "forgiveness always leads to reconciliation, and reconciliation results from mutual expressions of forgiveness. They cannot, finally be separated" (1998:18)." Lederach, in describing his personal approach to reconciliation, also emphasizes that forgiveness is a critical element. Minow and other observers of the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa discuss how the need to grant forgiveness can be empowering to victims, who ultimately can choose whether or not to forgive perpetrators of violence and other crimes (Minow, 1998).

Apology, which was uncommon in politics until recently, has suddenly become central to the dynamics of conflict resolution at many levels. Political leaders, groups, states, and even international organizations are asked to apologize and their response is taken as a measure of their sincerity and future intentions. At the same time, apologies are relatively easy to offer and frequently there is debate about whether they are sincere. As a result, apologists are often asked to demonstrate their sincerity with actions such as reparations payments (Dodd, 1999).

A significant political problem can be deciding who, if anyone, can apologize for the actions of people who are no longer in power or are now dead. But that is not always an issue. For example, many Jews have had little trouble accepting statements from recent popes about the church’s early stance on the role of Jews in Jesus’ death or the role of the church during World War II. A more complicated situation arises when there is not only a change of leaders but also a regime change. Can current German leaders apologize for the atrocities of the Nazi regime, or can current Russian leaders address the crimes of the Soviet era?

Similarly, there can be confusion about forgiveness. Who can ask for it, and who can grant it? What does it mean that cultures and religious traditions differ in how they view forgiving? For example, in the mid-19th century, the United States seized the property of Japanese Americans living on the West Coast and placed them in internment camps for most of World War II, even though there was no evidence of a security threat. (It is interesting that residents of Hawaii of Japanese origin, a larger but more integrated group than those on the mainland, were never detained.) At first the U.S. government defended its actions (which were supported by a 1943 Supreme Court decision). Over the years, however, there was an increasing consensus that the government had overreacted and had denied the Japanese Americans their basic rights. By the 1970s there was an organized movement seeking an apology and reparations, both of which were finally granted in 1988 (Espiritu, 1992; Takeda, 1995).

Apologies (and perhaps reparations) are most likely to occur in situations where there is clearly a perpetrator and a victim and a clear consensus that the perpetrator’s actions were wrong, as in the case of the Japanese Americans. In the cases of the Nazi regime or South Africa under Apartheid, the widespread agreement about the evils committed has resulted in apologies being offered (though in the South African case only from some of Apartheid’s architects and implementers). Apology can be even slower than in the Japanese American case; two striking examples are British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s apology to Ireland for the British failure to distribute food to Irish during the potato famine of a previous generation? And can an apology be accepted that involves forgiving the children without forgiving the Nazi perpetrators themselves?

Apologies and forgiveness can be difficult steps for groups that may, in many ways, be prepared to settle their conflict but find themselves unable or unwilling to apologize or forgive. To my knowledge, none of the major actors in the Israeli-Palestinian or Northern Irish conflicts has publicly expressed a willingness to apologize (though they certainly would want to formally accept the other side’s forgiving). But many have made clear that they want to develop new institutional arrangements to end the long-term pattern of violent conflict.

Reparations

Reparations are payments to compensate victims for their suffering that are often taken to indicate that an apology is sincere. At the same time that victims often demand reparations, the actual amount of reparations is rarely seen at full compensation for the suffering (let alone the material losses) that victims or their survivors have endured. Yet reparations, like apologies, take on an important symbolic and emotional meaning.

Even though apologies and reparations seem warranted when there is broad consensus that past actions were wrong, they are rarely seen as sufficient to end a conflict. For example, many Jews have had little trouble accepting statements from recent popes about the church’s early stance on the role of Jews in Jesus’ death or the role of the church during World War II. A more complicated situation arises when there is not only a change of leaders but also a regime change. Can current German leaders apologize for the atrocities of the Nazi regime, or can current Russian leaders address the crimes of the Soviet era?
of the 1840s, a fact that historians have widely accepted for some time, and the pope’s recent apology for the Crusaders’ sacking of Constantinople in the thirteenth century.

Thus, even when there is a clear perpetrator and victim, apology and reparations often do not follow quickly (if at all). In most long-term ethnic conflicts, however, steps toward reconciliation involving explicit apology, forgiveness, and reparations are rare. More common are cases in which both groups see themselves as victims of past injustices that are not necessarily fully redressed by recent goodwill gestures or even apology. Certainly this is the case with Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Palestinians and Jews in the Middle East, and Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. It applies as well to black-white relations in the United States (Myers, 1990).

Acknowledgment

Apologies and reparations are one way to signal a readiness to launch a new relationship, but fortunately not the only way since instances where apology occurs and reparations are paid are rare. When all parties emphasize their vulnerability and see themselves as victims, apology is not imaginable either politically or psychologically. A possible alternative, however, is acknowledgment. It involves recognizing that a group or individuals have suffered past injustices while remaining ambiguous about one’s own connection to those actions. To be effective acknowledgment must offer sincere, powerful symbolic gestures to victims that can help restore (or build) honor. What needs to be acknowledged varies, of course, across situations, but at the most general level acknowledgment works by recognizing the existence of a group and the emotional significance of its narrative of past injustices. Let us then, imagine three different white responses to an African American’s account of slavery:

1. “Don’t blame me, my ancestors didn’t get here until 1905.”
2. “It must be terrible to think about the pain and suffering your ancestors experienced while living as someone else’s property.”
3. “Slavery is awful to imagine. What’s worse is that there is still a legacy today. There is no doubt that even since slavery was ended, my ancestors and I have benefited from whose privilege even though my family didn’t come to this country until 1905.”

The first response is a defensive nonstarter; it is inflammatory since the responder shows no empathy whatsoever. I imagine that in Israel the equivalent occurs when Palestinians tell Jews not to blame them for the Holocaust (“We don’t want to suffer because of something that was done to you”) or when Jews tell Palestinians that their loss of homes and olive groves in 1948 would have been avoided if they had accepted the 1947 Partition Plan.

The second and third responses are different because they offer an emotional connection. In neither case does the responder apologize for slavery in the sense of taking responsibility for it, but the statements do perhaps speak to the need for recognition and acknowledgment. The second response does so by identifying with the reactors’ feelings; in the third response this is also accompanied by an acknowledgment of the modern legacy of slavery and the admission that the responder has probably benefited from it, at least unintentionally. Statements of this sort can open the door to dialogue and possible remediation, such as affirmative action programs.

Acknowledgment can take many forms, but its significance lies in the emotional linkage it establishes between individuals or groups. Acknowledgment has an important symbolic component. It may take a verbal form, as in President Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 speech on civil rights in which he said, “We shall overcome,” a clear sign that he, a white Southerner, identified fully with the civil rights movement’s major goals. Or the words that are uttered may be far less significant than the action that accompanies them, such as Tony Blair’s January 2001 meeting with the Catholic family of a man killed three and a half years earlier by a Protestant mob in Portadown, the site of the most bitter conflicts over Loyalist parades in the region.

Mechanisms of Reconciliation

There are two questions to ask about the mechanisms underlying reconciliation. First, if reconciliation works, how does it work? Second, is reconciliation between individuals and small face-to-face groups similar or different from reconciliation between large social groups or countries? I explicitly address the first here while the second remains in the background, although the similarity across the levels is implicit here and in the sparse writings on this issue in recent years.

The most general explanation for how reconciliation works focuses on emotional and cognitive reordering, which enables the development of a new relationship between former enemies. Bar-Tal (2006b) calls this a shift from a conflictive ethos to a peace ethos. This changed worldview can be understood in terms of a variety of specific mechanisms. They include the psychodynamic processes of grief and mourning (Volkan, 1985; Kelman, 1991); the use of apologies, forgiveness, and reparations (Minow, 1998); the development of a
more inclusive vision of the society to which one is emotionally connected (Ross, 2001); the rehumanization of former opponents; acknowledgment and recognition; and incentives that reward cooperation. 2

Lederman (1999) three sequences—(i) past, present, future; (ii) present, future, past; and (iii) future, present, past—are strategies for promoting reconcili-

ation and for increasing the likelihood that its four key elements (truth, memory, justice, and peace) are included in the process. In addition, his approach emphasizes the importance of narratives (storytelling) in reconciliation. This theme is echoed in Minow’s and other discussions of truth telling as a me-

chanism for validating past trauma and healing deep psychological wounds. The stress on validation and acknowledgment not only addresses the experience of individuals but also is significant because it resonates with the traumas that many have experienced. The accounts of the work of various truth commissions suggest that their effectiveness is not in their capacity to compile a complete and accurate historical record, but in the fact that the cases they hear (in some cases a small, well-selected sample) resonate so widely among the pop-

ulation. 14 Identification with the individual victims and victims’ sense of being members of a community of victims are central elements of this dynamic.

Truth and reconciliation matter because they validate the emotional core of individual and group memory in settings where the absence of validation was a central fact of social existence. What is addressed is the deep fear that opponents are engaged in efforts not only to thrust a group physically but also to deny their past. How else can we understand the Serb effort to bulldoze mosques and immediately pave the ground with parking lots as soon as they captured Bosnian villages, or the deliberate Serb actions to destroy culturally significant objects and monuments at the National Library in Sarajevo during the war (Selby, 1996)? Or Golba Meic’s widely publicized comments that there was no such thing as a Palestinian? Or the rage that Holocaust denial evoke? Or the use of religious evidence to assert one’s national claims and deny those of an opponent (Abu el Hagg, 1995; Brezenfeld, 2000)? In each of these situations not only is the core of a group’s narrative challenged, but their “known” experience is destroyed or denied.

Understanding the power of a group’s narratives requires that we examine the symbolic and ritual dimensions of reconciliation. Because of the political complexity surrounding the use of apology and reparations, acknowledgment may be an especially useful mechanism for achieving at least partial reconcili-

ation, and ritual and symbolic action can be crucial in the dynamics of ac-

knowledgment.

Ritual and the Politics of Reconciliation

Ritual and Symbolic Action: Sacred Sites and Cultural Performance

Symbolic and ritual action can be helpful in reconciliation processes for a number of reasons: (i) when direct apology is difficult, symbolic action can be easier for former enemies to express; (ii) when words are sometimes seen as easy to utter, symbolic actions can be viewed as more sincere; and (iii) whereas verbal apologies are more cognitive, symbolic actions are often more affective. My argument is not that symbolic actions are more important than verbal ones but rather that because the two work differently, they can both contribute to reconciliation processes.

Symbolic actions are behaviors whose significance lies less in the actions themselves than in the meanings individuals and groups ascribe to them. For example, a handshake between two older men is a commonplace occurrence. However, when PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin shook hands at the White House in 1993, Israelis, Palestinians, and many others ascribed great emotional significance to this simple gesture. Symbolic action takes many forms, and its importance lies in the capacity of symbols and rituals to variously provoke arousal or reassurance in observers (Edelman, 1964). Symbols work by evoking narratives about the past to make sense of the present (Buckley, 1998: 9).

When we examine long-term ethnic conflicts, it is evident that almost any difference between groups can serve as a symbolic focal point for conflict. Many conflicts today involve issues of language use, nationalism, schools, road signs, and even in offices and stores (Latin, 1989, 1998; Levine, 1991). Music and public art such as murals or sculptures are statements of group identity and are easily transformed into sources of conflict (Jarman, 1997). Cultural performances such as parades or religious ceremonies can be among the most powerful expressions of group identity and can produce some of the strongest reactions from groups locked in conflict (Jarman, 1997; Bryan, 1998, 2000). The Taliban’s destruction of ancient Buddha statues in Afghanistan and the conflict over antiquities in Jerusalem’s Old City show that present fears influse the past and its objects with significance.

Sacred Sites

Almost all groups have places that are sacred to them. These places mark key events in a group’s past and are often associated with emotionally charged victories or defeats, miracles, and the exploits of ancient heroes (Levinson,

2001).
1998). Often, though not always, these places will be associated with past battles. Sacred places are treasured and protected (Lemnath, 1993). So are religious sites that have been purified and sanctified. Sacred places are often particular-valuable because they contain holy relics that link a group's past to its present and future (Benvenisti, 2000). When I was in Sri Lanka in 1994, I visited the ancient city at Anuradhapura. This is an important Buddhist pilgrimage center that features beautiful buildings, thousands of monks in flowing saffron robes, as well as ordinary people. It is also the site of a sacred Bodhi-tree, which guarded day and night. It grew from a sapling from the tree under which the Buddha gained Enlightenment in 548 B.C.E., and was brought from India in the third century. The mood is tranquil. A few years earlier a group of Tamil Tigers attacked Anuradhapura, firing automatic weapons that killed 150 people and wounded hundreds more. On my visit there I was told about the attack, but instead of focusing on the dead and wounded my host emphasized, "They tried to destroy our tree." Destruction of the tree would have been a far deadlier assault on Sinhalese Buddhists than the murderous one that took place.

Sacred places involve a number of contradictions. On the one hand, they represent strength and continuity, on the other, the need to safeguard them suggests that they are also weak and vulnerable. Catholic (and other) holy places need to be consecrated, but can also be desecrated and this can threaten the foundations of a group's existence.14 If sacred sites are corrupted, their special significance is in jeopardy unless they are ritually purified. Sometimes groups are expelled from their sacred sites, and this highlights their vulnerability in ways that all can see. Possession and control over its sacred sites signifies a group's strength and well-being, but sometimes it is believed these must be validated by recapturing lost sites as Christians did during the Crusades when they sought to liberate the land of Jesus' birth from "the infidels." Finally, there is a radical contrast between, on the one hand, the importance of concrete, material ownership (for some, sovereignty) and control over sacred sites and the relics they contain and, on the other, the very emotional, spiritual, and nonmaterial significance of sacred places that transcends their physical significance.

Cultural Expression Through Public Performance: Loyalist Parades in Northern Ireland

Contested Loyalist parades in Northern Ireland are a case that illustrates the role of ritual action in ethnic conflict and reconciliation. These parades become a focus of yearly picaresque/dramas in areas such as South Belfast and Portadown. Each side bases its position on competing rights—freedom of speech ("The right to walk the King's highway") versus the right to be free from intimidation (not unlike competing definitions of Ariel Sharon's September 2000 visit to the Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary). In the context of a polarized society such as Northern Ireland or Israel, there is no effective juridical solution to such a conflict, since neither side views the judiciary or administration as sufficiently legitimate to rule in the matter. Thus, in Northern Ireland since 1995 parade disputes have resulted in violence. Yet whereas the Orange Order parades in Portadown lead to immediate confrontations, some parade disputes, such as those in Londonderry/Derry, have moved toward settlement through ritual and symbolic redemption from exclusive to inclusive cultural events.

Throughout the "marching season" in Northern Ireland, Protestant men in dark suits and bowler hats assemble at local lodges, attend church services, and hold parades, celebrating past victories, such as the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 when William of Orange's Protestant forces defeated the army of the Catholic King James II, and commemorating losses, such as the many deaths of soldiers in the Battle of the Somme in World War I. Protestant accounts of the parades and the occasions they mark emphasize religious tolerances, religious nature (Lucy and McClure, 1997). Banners celebrate key events in Protestant history, especially those of the Williamite period such as the Battle of the Boyne, and represent important religious themes, symbols, and persons. Boys accompany the marchers playing familiar music, bearing important politicians address the crowd (Bryan, 1998, 2000; Jarman, 1997). Catholics, however, are often angry when the marchers parade through their neighborhoods. They resent what they regard as the parades' narrow, sectarian nature. They are also upset about what they see as a stress on Protestant triumphalism and domination, the aggressive music of the "blood and thunder" (or "kick the pope") bands that often flaunt paramilitary symbols, and the anti-Catholic lyrics of many of the songs.15

In recent years Loyal Order parades in South Belfast and Portadown have provoked intense conflict and violence, and competing definitions of group rights have produced standoff. In Londonderry/Derry, however, contestation over the Apprentice Boys of Derry parades has been mitigated by redefinition. The Catholic-dominated City Council, various third parties, and cross-community dialogue have played important roles in a process lasting several years and still continuing (Kelly and Nen, 1998; Ross, 2003). This process has led to changes in the structure of the celebration, including agreements about
Rituals as Mechanisms of Acknowledgment and Reconciliation

I began with the observation that political scientists have given scant, if any, attention to reconciliation in analyzing the termination of inter-state conflicts. I then asked whether reconciliation, even if it is not necessary, can facilitate peace-making or peace-building. The evidence for or against reconciliation in large-group and inter-state conflicts is thin. Here I have marshaled some theory and anecdotal evidence that reconciliation helps groups redefine their relationships in more constructive directions. Finally, I maintained that if reconciliation is understood to include explicit apology, forgiveness, and reparations, it will probably be extremely difficult to implement in either interstate or inter-state politics; instead, it may be more widely relevant if it is defined in terms of acknowledgment, which involves symbolic and ritual acts that help reinterpret how groups perceive each other.

Acknowledgment and reconciliation can perhaps help in implementing agreements through the development of inclusive rituals that link different communities or the redefinition of older rituals so that they are no longer highly threatening and exclusive. This is not easy where group identity and group celebrations are often defined in opposition to another community. However, legitimating divergent identities in ways that are non- (or less) threatening is an important part of the reconciliation process.

Most commonly we think about the divisive role that symbolic and ritual action plays in ethnic conflict. There is no doubt that ethnic entrepreneurs, political leaders pressured in short-term gains, and even sincere patriots at times mobilise support through emotionally charged symbolic appeals. Although it is easy to berate figures such as Ariel Sharon for further polarizing Jews and Palestinians with his visit to the Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary in September 2000, or Shoshan Milosevic, for his constant invocation of the Serb defeat in the battle of Kosovo in 1915 to mobilize support throughout the 1990s, the more central question concerns not leaders’ motives but why followers respond as they do. It is obvious what the “sellers” hope to gain, but what explains the “buyers”? The answer seems to lie in the dynamics of social identity, in which they see their fate as intimately tied to that of the group. When the group prospers, so do they; when it suffers, so does their self-esteem (Tajfel, 1981; Brown, 1986). Recent psychodynamically informed theorizing gives a similar answer, suggesting that leaders play on followers’ need for attachment and their vulnerability to claims that the symbols of their identity are at risk (Volkan, 1988, 1997; Ross, 1995).
A Small and a Large Caution

Two cautionary notes about the politics of reconciliation relate to the fact that reconciliation can be part of peacemaking and peacebuilding but is not a substitute for them. Since at the core of ethnic conflicts lie real differences in interests and identities, peace processes must address both of these as broadly as possible and reconciliation cannot do the whole job itself.

My first caution is to note that there may be significant costs to reconciliation, even if they inhibit rather than advance peace processes. Since reconciliation is difficult, not all former enemies may be ready for it even if they have signed an agreement ending overt hostilities. Insisting on reconciliation before the parties themselves are ready for it may exacerbate delicate situations and remove the sense that parties have chosen to move toward each other, an essential element in reconciliation.

A more serious warning is that the need and timing, for reconciliation are often not the same for all parties. Not surprisingly, in most conflicts the dynamics are different in each community. However, when one party reaches out to the other and feels rebuffed, anger and even rage can be released. In situations of great inequality in power and economic resources, for example, a central question for the weaker party—and sometimes a key test of the stronger party’s desire for reconciliation—is its latter’s willingness to redistribute resources. In both South Africa and Israel-Palestine, and to some extent in black-white relations in the United States, for the weaker parties moral reconciliation is much more connected to questions of inequality than for the stronger one, reminding us that different parties’ needs are often not reciprocal.

The Need for Inclusive (New and Transformed) Symbols and Rituals

All too common are divisive, exclusive rituals that pit one group against another. In terms of reconciliation, the symbols and rituals of interest are those of a very different character that help previously separated groups feel less threatened.

Consider the following images: Anwar Sadat addressing the Knesset; Nelson Mandela donning a Springbok jersey—the Rabin-Arafat handshake; pictures of Sri Lanka’s Gerry Adams and unionist leader David Trimble talking and then shaking hands; Mandela and F. W. de Klerk holding hands while seated side-by-side during a presidential debate; President Bill Clinton reviewing Vietnamese troops in Hanoi; Willy Brandt on his knees in Auschwitz; King Hussein of Jordan on his knees with the families of Israeli children killed by a deranged Jordanian soldier; Black and white American holding hands in the Selma to Montgomery march. Each of these is a powerful image of intergroup connectedness, of reaching out and acceptance. By themselves these are not complete reconciliation events, but they are significant components of them. What these images communicate is both acknowledgment of a past and the image of a different future. They establish, or strengthen, a link between previously divided people.

When single actions such as these are generalized and regularized, when events once exclusively associated with one group are transformed, is when new behaviors prove institutionalized as more inclusive events that involve participants from different communities, rituals can serve as instruments for reconciliation. This is seen, for instance, in the changed relations between religious communities. Since the 1960s Catholics have participated in ecumenical services with other Christian denominations including the Orthodox, and Pope John Paul II recently became the first pope to attend an Orthodox mass or to visit a mosque. In addition, in some places different denominations have been willing to share the same buildings. In some venues such as certain American college campuses, different religious groups (Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu) use the same building for their religious services. At times temples in Sri Lanka have been places of worship for both Hindus and Buddhists (Tambiah, 1986); certain sites in India have been sacred to both Hindus and Muslims (van der Veen, 1994); in the Middle East there have been sites such as the Cave of Jeremiah near Hebron that members of many faiths regard as sacred and use for prayer.

Holidays

Many groups have exclusive marked days. One sign of a highly divided society is the absence of holidays and other rituals that are commemorated across groups. In Northern Ireland the anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, in which so many British soldiers died in 1916, is a solemn occasion for Protestants, even though the soldiers killed included a large number of Catholics as well as Protestants from Ireland. Republicans, however, view fighting and dying in this battle as support for the British and have been unwilling to mark their own losses in a way that would communicate a link with Protestants. Another example from Northern Ireland is that for years St. Patrick’s Day has been celebrated exclusively by Catholics even though there is no religious reason that Protestants could not mark the day as well. In recent years there have
been efforts to invite Protestants to march in the St. Patrick's Day parades in Dublin, Belfast, and elsewhere. Although some have done so, Republicans' aggressive display of the Irish Tricolor has so far hobbled the parades' effectiveness for building cross-community bridges. It should not be surprising that there are few shared symbols and rituals across groups in divided societies. Following the American Civil War, Memorial Day emerged as a solemn occasion to pay tribute to those who had died in battle. In the North, however, the soldiers who were remembered were exclusively northern soldiers who had died to save the Union (Warner, 1895); in the former Confederate states, the fallen who were honored were Southerners. There was no acknowledgment that both sides had suffered severe losses. Similarly, Civil War statues and other memorials in the United States almost never are to soldiers of both sides, though on the battlefield at Gettysburg there are memorials to both in close proximity (Linenthal, 1993). What does exist in the United States, however, are other holidays and memorials that bring together those from the former Union and the former Confederacy, such as Veterans Day, July 4, and Thanksgiving. Of course, the passage of time and geographic mobility within the country have considerably mitigated the divisions of the mid-nineteenth century.

In polarized settings, holidays marking glories of one group are often experienced as sharply humiliating for another. For example, Israel's Independence Day is called al-sabta (the catastrophe) by Palestinians. In Europe, the French have on occasion rebuffed the Germans when they have made overtures to hold joint ceremonies on Armistice Day, November 11, on the anniversary of the Day of Armistice. Invented or redefined holidays can be important to one or several groups. If they are to serve as rituals for reconciliation, it is crucial that these holidays not be exclusive. Kwanzaa is an invented festival for African Americans that celebrates their African heritage. However, just like Martin Luther King Day, now a national holiday, its recognition of black experiences and roots is not hostile to whites and does not discourage white involvement and participation. Indeed, on Martin Luther King Day many communities hold intergroup services and community service activities in which blacks and whites participate.

Language

A last domain for symbolic and ritual action is that of language, which is perhaps the most common area of cultural conflict. Language serves as both an obvious marker of group differences and a focal point for bitter ethnic conflict when groups make demands that their language be the state's official language or have a privileged status in the public domain. Language is also one of the easiest ways to associate the state with a particular group. In Quebec, conflict between francophones and anglophones has raised important questions of economic power and political control. Similarly in Catalonia, language is the basis on which demands for regional and cultural autonomy are justified. In many Third World countries and recently independent states in Eastern and Central Europe, language rights are seen as essential to issues of group recognition (Latini, 1998). Sometimes a sign of reconciliation between groups is increasing bilingualism, or regional autonomy in language policy.

It is not hard to find psychocultural dramas that develop around language issues. In Quebec, following the Parti Quebecois's victory in 1976 and the passage of Law 101, anglophones emigrated from the region around many of those who stayed protested new restrictions on the use of English in offices and education as well as the prohibition of English street and business signs (Kentie, 1993). The result was a series of protracted negotiations among the Canadian provinces and continued threats of Quebec's secession, still continuing today. It is interesting that in this conflict, just when the federal government accepted the notion of Canada as a bilingual state, Quebecers asserted the need for a monolingual region.

In Central and Eastern Europe, bitter conflicts over language policy since 1990 in Slovakia, Estonia, Moldova, and elsewhere have unleashed violence at times and pitted hard-core nationalists against regional minorities in newly independent states. In Slovakia, the conflict focused on Hungarian-speakers in the southern part of the country and demands that they show their loyalty by learning Slovak and removing public signs in Hungarian. Although the ethnic tension seems to have eased following the 1998 elections, the conflict has not been settled. Similarly, Estonia and Moldova are two newly independent states with large Russian minorities. In Estonia, conflict has centered on the question of citizenship; Estonians passed legislation that granted citizenship to Russian-speakers only if they passed an examination in the Estonian language, which many long-time Russian residents of Estonia had never bothered to learn. Despite the intensity of some language disputes, a number of countries have found ways to settle them or at least keep them nonviolent. In Canada, for example, despite all the strident rhetoric of oppression and the strong support for secession, language conflict has not been violent. Similarly, Spain since Franco's death has granted regional autonomy to Catalonia and other regions, allowing them to set their own language policies, thereby avoiding confrontations between minorities and the state. India is another interesting, and com-
RITUAL AND THE POLITICS OF RECONCILIATION

Societal order in the utilitarian sense is often perceived as a stable and uniformly beneficial state of affairs. However, this perspective neglects the dynamic nature of social structures and the role of ritual in sustaining these structures. Rituals are not merely symbolic acts but are deeply embedded in the lived experience of communities, providing a framework for collective action and identity. This chapter explores the complex interplay between ritual practices and political reconciliation, drawing on cases from various cultural contexts.

1. Although I suggest that specific goals are associated with particular situations, this does not mean that these goals are those of all people and groups in these countries. Instead, I am referring to what I understand to be the dominant pattern in each of these long-term conflict situations.

2. Reconciliation at the interstate level as it is now discussed is a relatively recent phenomenon. Given the view of states as strategic actors (at least since the Treaty of Westphalia), the need to address moral or identity issues through a process such as reconciliation was not apparent. At the interstate level as well, losers of civil wars were expected to accept their vanquished status and to benefit from the institutional benefits the state offered.

3. For example, Dadda reports that the mayor of Honolulu invited Japanese officials to a ceremony to mark the fortieth anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor on the condition that they apologize for the war. The Japanese refused, claiming that "the entire world is responsible for the war" (Dadda, 1993). In December 1993, the Japanese foreign minister expressed "deep remorse" for the wartime suffering that followed Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, yet a few days later the Japanese parliament considered apologizing for the attack but did not do so in the end.

4. The declaration recognized past injustices that both countries had committed. The Germans admitted responsibility for the Munich Agreement in 1938 and for the expulsion of people from the Sudetenland, the Czechs expressed regret for the suffering and wrongs caused by the expulsion and forced resettlement of the Sudeten Germans (Hantl, 1997; 1999). It was also agreed not to burden each side with political and legal questions from the past, and a fund was created for projects of mutual interest.

5. For a discussion of some of the problems and ambiguities in studying reconciliation with large quantitative data, see Brueck and Long (1999).

6. Dreff (1998) discusses some important differences between the Christian and Jewish approaches to forgiveness.

7. Not all were citizens; only those born in the United States were citizens, since U.S. law at the time prohibited the naturalization of all but white immigrants.

8. It is often implicitly assumed that one begins by changing attitudes and that behaviors change thereafter. This is particularly true in what Gary Fieldman (1999) calls moral recognition. However, instrumental pragmatic reconciliation probably works differently. Here, behaviors are changed and it is hoped that new beliefs will follow. One example of such a dynamic is found in Phase 3 of the Rob-ber's Case experiment, in which superordinate goals are used to produce cooperation among the two groups. Following several positive experiences of working together, the researchers found that the groups came to view each other more positively (Durrer et al., 1988). In the case of European integration, many assumed that once the benefits of economic cooperation were visible, political integration would proceed and national identities would weaken. Events in Europe in the 1990s, however, suggest important limits to this assumption.
22. The case of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem shows, however, that sharing is not necessarily associated with goodwill and trust.

23. Recently learned of a more local effort to create cross-community linkage around St. Patrick’s Day. In Derry in 2000, the Apprentice Boys of Derry, the loyal order whose parade and cultural festival were described above, decided to host a St. Patrick’s Day and invited a number of Catholics, who told me that the event was highly successful.

24. In recent years there have been intense disputes over flying the Confederate flag in southern states and the inclusion of it in some state flags. See Fierman (2000) as well as a more general treatment of the symbolic power of the American flag in Marvin and Ingle (1990).

25. Volkan’s term, “the chosen trauma,” is particularly apt (Volkan, 1997).
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