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ARTICLE

Conflict as Communion: Toward an Agonistic Ecclesiology

Kyle B.T. Lambelet[1]

Email: kyle.lambelet@emory.edu

Abstract

Though Anglican theologians, clergy, and laypeople have written and spoken extensively about the current status of the Anglican Communion, the conceptualization and practice of conflict has itself remained largely unexamined. This essay argues for the necessity of a better theology of conflict, one rooted in a Trinitarian account of unity through difference. It shows that Anglicans have tended to think of conflict-as-sin or conflict-as-finitude. The essay commends a semantic shift that develops conflict-as-communion. Conflict is a means of grace that animates the divine life of the Trinity, enables God's work of salvation in history, and is a natural part of good human sociality. This theology of conflict can allow generative relational practices, some of which are already in use across the Anglican Communion.

Keywords: agonism, Anglican Communion, conflict, Bruce Kaye, *perichoresis*, Trinity, John Webster

For the past generation, treatments of the status of the Anglican Communion, and within it The Episcopal Church, have had a foreboding air. Take, for example, eminent church historian John Booty's *The Episcopal Church in Crisis*.[2] Booty's account, published in 1988, was a retrospective that brought into view the previous four decades of The Episcopal Church. He treated racism, human sexuality, and war among other issues. Booty situated his understanding of the 'crisis' in an account of rapid cultural change, as well as enduring questions about Episcopal identity in the midst of that change.

The term 'crisis' is popular in this genre. More recently, Miranda K. Hassett, Episcopal priest and cultural anthropologist, wrote *Anglican Communion in Crisis*, published in 2007.[3] Whereas Booty focused on the Episcopalians, Hassett tracks how the internal debate among Episcopalians became globalized through

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[1]Kyle B.T. Lambelet is a postdoctoral fellow at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA.

[2]John E. Booty, *The Episcopal Church in Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1988).

[3]Miranda Katherine Hassett, *Anglican Communion in Crisis: How Episcopal Dissidents and their African Allies Are Reshaping Anglicanism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

new alliances between those she identifies as 'Episcopal dissidents' and Southern Anglican partners. Hassett brings particular attention to the dynamics of globalization, both as process and tactic, and demonstrates how new alliances have remapped the terrain of global Anglicanism.

Across the pond, theological ethicist Oliver O'Donovan has also used the term 'crisis' in his collection of essays on 'the gay controversy and the Anglican Communion' under the title *Church in Crisis* in 2008.[4] For O'Donovan, the root of the crisis is interpretive and theological. His work asks, what is the status of Anglican witness today?

Intensifying the rhetoric of 'crisis', journalist Stephen Bates put the problem more bluntly with his 2004 book *A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality*.[5] With the incisive attention of a journalistic muckraker, Bates gives the blow-by-blow account of the politicized war of words and ecclesiastical maneuvering that has troubled the communion in the last three decades.

And as though crisis and war were not enough, Christopher Craig Brittain, a Canadian Anglican priest and professor, adds disease in his recently published book *A Plague on Both their Houses*, drawing on Shakespeare's Mercutio and his indictment of the noble families Montague and Capulet.[6] Brittain's careful ethnographic study of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh disrupts any clean 'culture wars' explanation of the conflict, and instead uses the metaphor of divorce, in addition to disease, to describe what transpired there.

Crisis, war, plague: these seem like descriptors better suited to security studies conferences than treatments of a global ecclesial communion. The semantic fields of these terms are overwhelmingly negative. Yet, these are the words and metaphors that scholars, church leaders, lay people, and informed onlookers alike have used to describe the status of conflict in the Anglican communion, a global 'family of 38 national or regional churches in 164 countries with over 75 million members'.[7] Like most significant conflicts, this one has been a conflict in part about what the conflict is about. I imagine that many of us can relate: is this familial dispute really about who washes the dishes, or is something else going on here? Is this conflict about human sexuality, the structure of the communion, the ordination of women and homosexuals, the nature and extent of authority, the role of Scripture, the history of colonialism, or the current imbalance of power between the 'West' and 'the rest'?

While I am loathe to simply add another topic to this laundry list, I want to take up an aspect of this so-called crisis that Anglicans have tended to assume rather than analyze reflexively and theologically, namely, how we conceptualize conflict.

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[4]Oliver O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008).

[5]Stephen Bates, *A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004).

[6]Christopher Craig Brittain, *A Plague on Both their Houses: Liberal vs. Conservative Christians and the Divorce of the Episcopal Church USA* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015). See also William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (ed. René Weis; The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd Series; London: Arden Shakespeare, 2012).

[7]Ian T. Douglas, 'Called to Reconciliation: The Challenge of Globalization and the Anglican Communion', in Frank T. Griswold and Barbara Leix Braver (eds.), *I Have Called You Friends: Reflections on Reconciliation: In Honor of Frank T. Griswold* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2006), p. 156.

As the titles just surveyed already illustrate, Anglicans have tended to think about the current status of the Anglican communion through negative metaphors: terms of emergency, violence, and disease.[8] I want to suggest that we need to fundamentally rethink the semantic field of our metaphors. We have assumed that conflict is evidence of sin or finitude, rather than seeing conflict as not only a natural part of human relationships, but as a means of grace: one that animates the divine life of the Trinity and God's salvation history. Thus, negatively, I argue that Anglicans have largely failed in our theological conceptualization of conflict. Positively, however, I want to suggest that our description of the Anglican communion ought to include a theological account of what peace studies scholars have called healthy conflict. In other words, I wish to make the case for a more positive, theological reception of agonism, or struggle, in the church and suggest that celebrating such struggle might enable a more faithful practice of Christian unity.

I make my argument in three steps. First, I examine in a bit more depth the ways that Anglicans have tended to semantically symbolize conflict theologically. I construct a typology of the theological conceptualization of conflict and demonstrate that Anglicans have tended to metaphorically imagine conflict as sin or finitude rather than as a means of communion. Second, I develop a theological account of conflict-as-communion commending a shift in the semantic field that informs our understanding of conflict. I show that conflict, rightly conceived, animates the internal relations of the Trinity, God's work of salvation in history, and our natural human sociality. Third, I conclude by suggesting a few ways in which this alternative metaphor for conflict might allow not only new thoughts but new practices for the doing of communion among Anglicans.

In short, my contention is that Anglicans need to theologically rethink conflict. Conflict is not inevitably a consequence of sin or finitude, but is a part of the divine life of the Trinity that can also animate ecclesial unity. This rethinking will have immediate practical consequences and can be informed, in fact, by the constructive ecclesial practice of conflict that is already taking place across the communion.

Symbolizing Conflict in the Anglican Communion

Those familiar with the sundry details of the last three decades of Anglican discourse will likely wonder at this point: a different theological conceptualization of ecclesial conflict sounds nice, but is it self-deluding? What words would be appropriate to describe the polemics of mutual recrimination that have too frequently been part of the global discussion?

Take, for example, the controversies surrounding the 1998 Lambeth Conference. On the one hand, liberal American bishop John Shelby Spong commented preceding the Conference that African Christians are 'superstitious, fundamentalist[s]'

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[8]One notable exception to the announcers of doom are historians. See Mark D. Chapman, *Anglican Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2012). See also the volume edited by Thomas P. Power (ed.), *Change and Transformation: Essays in Anglican History* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013). Another exception are priests and canons like C.K. Roberts who are thinking with Scripture about ecclesial conflict. See C.K. Robertson, 'Courtroom Dramas: A Pauline Alternative for Conflict Management', *Anglican Theological Review* 89.4 (2007), pp. 589–610. While I sympathize with aspects of Roberts' project, I still find his essay overly concerned with conflict as a problem to be managed.

who have 'moved out of animism into a very superstitious kind of Christianity . . . [and have] yet to face the intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Einstein that we've had to face in the developing world; that is just not on their radar screen'.[9] These demeaning remarks were broadcast through newly formed online networks and distributed to bishops on retreat at Canterbury prior to the decennial Lambeth gathering. Spong's comments left many African bishops justly offended.

On the other hand, later the same year in the days before the full Lambeth Conference, Bishop Emmanuel Chukwuma of Nigeria attempted an exorcism of gay British deacon Richard Kirker as he handed out leaflets. Bishop Chukwama shouted, 'That is why the church is dying in Europe – because it is condoning immorality. You are killing the church.'[10] The tenor of Chukwuma's rebuke would continue inside the conference proceedings leaving sexual minorities within the communion rightly questioning the capacity of the Anglican communion to listen to their voices and include them as full and equal members.

While these are some of the more extreme examples, they illustrate the depths of divisions within the Anglican Communion. It would seem there are good reasons to describe this kind of animosity and polemic within a Christian church as a crisis. And, largely, that is how Anglicans have done so.

But, below the polemics, how is conflict itself symbolized, imagined and described? What is the semantic field that conflict operates within? I would suggest there are at least two models of conflict that are currently operative within the Anglican Communion.

The first model imagines conflict as itself a sin, a blemish upon the holiness of the church that needs to be repressed, purged, or healed. We can call this model conflict-as-sin. For example, the Windsor Report requested by the Anglican Primates, commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury and published in 2004, describes the conflict as an illness, a sickness that (like Brittain's title suggests) plagues the communion.[11] The Windsor report identifies both surface-presenting symptoms – surveying the current debate regarding the blessing of same-sex couples and status of sexual minorities when considering ordination – as well as the deeper issues that have led to the illness – treating questions of theological development, authority, ecclesial procedure, and relationships across the communion. As an illness, conflict is a derivation from the prior healthy operation of the church. A healthy church contains, processes, and removes such conflict, as was the case with women's ordination, or so the Windsor Report argues.

Ecclesiologies that imagine the church as a holy people reflect this view of conflict-as-sin. Conflict arises when Christians forget who they are: a people of peace who follow the prince of peace. So, theologian John Webster argued that 'conflict can only be understood on the basis of the peace to which it is the opposing vice'.[12] Following Augustine's ontological prioritization of peace (as well as Aquinas's

[9]Hassett, *Anglican Communion in Crisis*, p. 72.
[10]Bates, *A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality*, p. 137.
[11]The Lambeth Commission on Communion, 'The Windsor Report' (London: The Anglican Communion Office, 2004), paras. 22–42.
[12]John Webster, 'Theology and the Peace of the Church', in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), p. 150.

appropriation of the same), Webster argued that peace is the most basic aspect of our nature and conflict is a mere derivation from it, a fall from created goodness. Conflict is not wrong, in a moral or imperative sense. Rather, conflict is untrue, in an indicative sense. Christians *qua* Christians are not people of conflict. Christians merely need to awaken and remember who we are: 'in the wake of the good news of peace by Jesus Christ, everything is different, the entire fabric of creation has been changed'.[13] For Webster, conflict is not a problem, rather, conflict does not finally exist.

Conflict, thus, like sin is a perversion of God's peace, not a thing with substance of its own. There are some real merits to this position, in particular its eschatological prioritization of peace. Yet, I worry that such a view tends to ignore the empirical reality of conflict present within the church. Though Webster willingly admits the *sinfulness* of the church (following Luther's statement that 'there is no greater sinner than the church'), it is not clear where the empirical reality of conflict within the church fits in his ecclesial model. As Christopher Craig Brittain rightly argues, Webster's argument yields the implication that 'when human assemblies fail to embody God's holiness, they are not in fact churches'.[14] In this way, Webster agrees with another Anglican theologian, Ephraim Radner, who suggests that the Holy Spirit may be absent from churches who are in conflict.[15] This model reaches its termination in calls for the church to lop off diseased parts, as when one Anglican primate referred to The Episcopal Church as 'a cancerous lump in the body [that] should be excised'.[16] This is no problem, of course, because the church in conflict is simply no church at all.

While I see sin as a real concern, and conflict often has a relationship to sin, I think we are mistaken to equate conflict and sin. A theologian as familiar with the history of the church as Webster should be able to think of a number of occasions in which conflict played an indispensable role in God's plan of salvation. Think, for example, of the early church chronicled in Acts 10–15 and the inclusion of the Gentiles. Was the conflict between Peter and Paul in itself sinful? Or, might we say, that through the conflict the Spirit was able to do something that would not have been possible otherwise? Moreover, we might question whether the ontology of peace, as Webster develops it, offers a theologically compelling account of God's good order. Is the peace of Christ one of stasis? Or is it a dynamic and unfolding reality? These are eschatologically speculative questions, but I raise them here because I think Webster's account of peace remains simply too limited, too static. An affirmation of the Holy Spirit's work in and in spite of human sinfulness seems to require a disaggregation of sin and conflict.

If not operating with an understanding of conflict-as-sin, Anglicans have tended to think of conflict-as-finitude. In this account of conflict, division and contestation are not necessarily the result of sin, but are the working out of the reality of the incarnation. At the popular level, talk of globalization tends to indicate this model

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[13]Webster, 'Theology and the Peace of the Church', p. 162.

[14]Brittain, *A Plague on Both their Houses*, p. 209.

[15]Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 26.

[16]Peter Akinola quoted in 'Nigeria Bishops Scorn US "Cancer",' *BBC News*, July 4, 2006, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5144036.stm.

at work: an acknowledgement of the significant diversity across a global communion that is now able to communicate and relate in ways that were not heretofore imaginable. According to advocates of this model conflict need not be repressed, but it does need to be managed in order that unity might be achieved.

Australian Anglican Bruce Kaye has developed this model most extensively. 'The trouble arises', Kaye argues, 'because we believe that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God and this Jesus lived in a past that was different from the present.'[17] The incarnation, according to Kaye, introduces an enduring tension in Christian theology between the dynamics of personal commitment and universal faith. Because the incarnation is not a new problem, Kaye reaches into the long history of Christians working out this ambiguity and the conflicts that it surfaced. Kaye reveals not a history of uniformity, but rather a history in which the tension between the local and the universal remains in constant flux, and even contestation – such as the attempt to consolidate imperial power in the papal office by Gregory VII and Anglican resistance. The question for Kaye is not how to enforce a reasonable uniformity in the midst of such diversity. Rather, the question is a relational one: how do Christians generally and Anglicans specifically love one another across their local variations?

Kaye proposes that catholicity, rather than unity, offers a better starting point for working out the challenges of relationship across a global communion. Kaye bases the distinction between catholicity and unity on the principle of subsidiarity and a commitment to the priority of the local. Rather than enforcing a unity from the top down by ensuring conformity to certain principles, Kaye proposes a looser relationship that works from the bottom up. Kaye does not wish to reject the possibility of unity. Instead, as he argues, 'starting from [catholicity] and moving to [unity] is more likely to be constructive, [and] is more in keeping with a dynamic notion of catholicity that itself carries richer resources and less negative baggage in the Anglican tradition than notions of unity and communion'.[18] Kaye makes the case for catholicity rather than unity as a priority concept. He does not reject unity as a telos of Christian witness. He does, however, argue that starting with catholicity will more readily get us to the good of unity than starting with a juridical account of unity and working our way down from there. The result of a prioritization of catholicity would involve a loosening of demands for uniformity and even institutional affiliation and would instead focus on the relationships that sustain covenant. This is admittedly hard work, work that requires digging into the actual substance of ecclesial conflicts rather than trying to manage the conflict through procedural maneuvers or theological fiat. But, I think Kaye is right that we need such engagement.

I am warm to Kaye's proposal; particularly his focus on relationships rather than juridical adherence as the measure of communion as well as his retrieval of the history of ecclesial conflict as a resource. In spite of these merits, Kaye still thinks that conflict largely remains a problem in need of a solution, a result of human finitude that needs to be resolved. This is surprising in part because of the long historical

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[17]Bruce N. Kaye, *Conflict and the Practice of Christian Faith: The Anglican Experiment* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), p. 4.

[18]Kaye, *Conflict and the Practice of Christian Faith*, p. 166.

memory that Kaye draws upon to make his argument. That history reveals not a resolution of conflict, but rather that conflict is part and parcel to what it has meant to be the church, to be an ecclesia or a public. As historian Mark Chapman has asserted: 'conflict is the normal state of "Anglican" theology in history'.[19] From the apostolic community remembered in Acts, to the ecumenical councils, to the Reformation, to today, conflict is basic to church history and Anglican identity. The conflict-as-sin model sees this as a result of human fallenness and attempts to cordon off the true mystical body of Christ from the empirical church. The conflict-as-finitude model sees this as an inevitability emerging from the incarnation and attempts to manage conflict in order to allow unity in difference.

While there are reasons to hold on to elements of both of these models, I want to suggest a third that I think offers a more theologically satisfying account of God's spirit working in and through conflict, not merely in spite of it. In other words, I want to suggest we shift our semantic field to allow a more positive account of agonistic conflict as a means of God's grace, a grace that animates even the internal life of the Trinity.

Toward a Theological Account of Conflict as Communion

Rather than conflict-as-sin or conflict-as-finitude I want to propose a third model, conflict-as-communion. This third model is already nascent in several corners of the Anglican communion, but has yet to be, to my knowledge, thematized. In particular, post-colonial, feminist, and historical theologians have been more attuned to the constructive possibilities of conflict, in ways to which I will gesture below.

But, for some of us, we have a visceral and negative reaction to conflict. When a conversation gets heated whether with a colleague, a family member, or a stranger, many of us tend to de-escalate, to back down, to try and resolve the conflict in some way. In one register, these desires for relational tranquility can be a reflection of our subject position: I am a conflict-avoidant, white, Midwestern American male. I hate the occasions that I have to complain to a waiter about my dish when they get it wrong. My spouse, whose cultural background is different, is always happy to argue: it is how she knows that we are engaged with and care about one another. I mention this anecdote simply to note that conflict is a cultural production, inflected not only by our formation but also our relative power and subject position.

But, our initially negative associations with conflict need not hold. Etymologically, conflict merely means 'to strike or clash together', from the Latin *confligere*.[20] While the dominant image that conflict as striking together may evoke is a fist striking an enemy, there are myriad alternatives: a hand knocking a door for entry, a bat hitting a ball, a knife cutting a carrot. In each case – a gesture of entry, play, or cuisine – the striking together is in no ways violent, but rather is a good part of creaturely life. I want to invite us to allow conflict, at least momentarily, to remain

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[19]Chapman, *Anglican Theology*, p. 7.
[20]Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (New York: Greenwich House, 1983), p. 115.

normatively neutral.[21] Doing so will allow a semantic shift that enables a new theological conceptualization of the goodness of conflict.

But, as I have already indicated in the survey of the conflict-as-sin and conflict-as-finitude models, we have good theological reasons to think of conflict as a problem. The current state of ecclesial division both between and within various denominational traditions seems an affront to Jesus' instruction to his followers not to delay in reconciling (Mt. 5.23-25) and his prayer, as remembered by the Gospel of John, that his disciples 'may all be one' (Jn 17.21a).

Jesus' prayer is, for example, the location from which theologian Anthony Baker draws his account of ecclesial unity.[22] Working from the unity of the first and second persons of the Trinity, Baker argues that ecclesial unity follows the same pattern: a gift that imitates the relational harmony of divine life. This pattern of theological reasoning is strikingly consistent across Anglican accounts of unity and communion. Whether it is Webster and his Augustinian impulse to emphasize the priority of peace or Kaye who locates the reason for conflict in the problem of the incarnation: the pattern is the same. While my agenda of rendering a positive, theological account of conflict is somewhat different than my esteemed colleagues', the theological pattern follows suit. If I am to offer such an account, I cannot merely work from the goodness of conflict in human sociality, as defenders of conflict transformation tend to do (an argument I will take up in a moment). Rather, if I am to offer a theological account of conflict I will need to start with a Trinitarian account of the divine life. As F.D. Maurice argued in the nineteenth century, 'unity among men [*sic*] rests upon a yet more powerful and perfect unity'.[23] Thus, I offer here three apologia for the goodness of conflict: the first argument rooted in an account of the internal life of the Trinity, the second argument based in salvation history, and the third from the goodness of human sociality which draws its inspiration from the divine life. Admittedly, none of these are fully developed. However, my intention is to merely clear the way for the possibility of a positive theological account of conflict. What I offer here is an outline of approach.

It seems, on first blush, dangerously close to heresy to suggest that there is conflict within the Trinity. That there would be any dissension or discord within the Godhead seems tantamount to an Arian rejection of Christ's divinity or, more significantly, a Marcionite rejection of Israel's affirmation of the oneness of God. Rather than a *perichoresis* of divine love, locating conflict within the Trinity would seem to indicate a communion of agonism and even violence. How could God be in conflict with God's-self?

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[21] It is essential for my argument to disaggregate conflict and violence. While the theological dimensions of this separation will have to be taken up elsewhere, see John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997); John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (The Little Books of Justice and Peacebuilding; Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003); John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[22] Anthony D. Baker, 'On Making Them All One: Unity, Transcendence and the Anglican Church', *Journal of Anglican Studies* 5.1 (June 2007), p. 11.

[23] Frederick Dennison Maurice cited by Chapman, *Anglican Theology*, p. 186.

Yet, a standard affirmation of Trinitarian theology is that the three persons of the Trinity are both distinct and inseparable.[24] Reductive focus on a monadic unity can obscure this point. Returning to Anthony Baker, for example: in his account of unity he focuses narrowly on John 17 as the paradigm following Jesus' prayer that his followers would be one as he and the first person of the Trinity are one. Certainly, any account of the interrelations of the Trinity would need to include an acknowledgement of this prayer for unity. However, what does such unity entail? Is it an affective unity of wills? Or is it a unity through difference, in which such differences are constructively maintained?

Thinking of unity as a mind-meld seems to neglect the record of Scripture, and what Sarah Coakley has called the 'messy entanglements' of Trinitarian desire and relations.[25] Take, for example, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as portrayed in the synoptic Gospels. While John's Gospel neglects Jesus' prayers in the garden, the prayer for unity recorded in ch. 17 precedes Jesus' arrest in ch. 18. In the scene recorded by the synoptics (Mt. 26.36-46; Mk 14.32-42; Lk. 22.39-46), Jesus wrestles with the path that God has set before him, a path that leads to the cross and his death. In his anguish Jesus wrestles with God, in a way reminiscent of the Hebrew paradigm of Jacob at the Jabbok (Gen. 32.22-32). Jesus prayed, according the Gospel of Luke, 'Father if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done' (22.42). Though Jesus expressed his willingness to submit to the will of God, that will was not identical to his own. In other words, Jesus' will was at odds with God the Father. The difference of will between the second and first persons of the Trinity is significant here. There is no mind meld, though Jesus does submit his will. The difference remains, even within the internal economy of the Trinity.

For a fuller scriptural picture of the agonistic relations of the Trinity add to the scene at Gethsemane the attribution to both the Son and the Spirit the title *paraclete* or advocate. First, regarding the Son, 1 Jn 2.1 assures sinners: 'we have an advocate (*paraclete*) with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous'. Paul also used this juridical metaphor for the work of Christ in Rom. 8.34 where Jesus is imaged interceding for sinners. The Gospels too repeat this motif (see Mt. 10.32-33; Lk. 12.8-9). These Scriptures depict Jesus as a lawyer in the divine court, one who stands beside and defends those who call upon his name. God as judge, the first person of the Trinity, is the one being appealed to and Jesus as advocate is standing beside the sinner advocating on her behalf. The judge and the advocate are distinct roles in the divine court, but both are needed for the drama of salvation. This same attribution of *paraclete* is given to the Spirit who, as in Mk 13.11, gives followers of Jesus the words to say when they are persecuted. Here the agonism is displaced from the internal life of the Trinity to the human court of law, but the conflict of the one shines light back on the other.

In light of these Scriptures the unity that Jesus prays for – 'that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me that they may become completely one' (Jn 17.22b-23a) – cannot be a oneness that obliterates difference, even the difference of wills. Rather, this is a oneness that includes struggle (as Jesus wrestled with the will of God in the Garden of Gethsemane) and contestation (as Jesus and the Spirit

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[24]Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 154.

[25]Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'on the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

advocate in the divine court). Admittedly, if we look to Scripture for a fully formed Trinitarian theology we will be sorely disappointed. Yet working with basic Trinitarian affirmations of the distinct persons of the Trinity united in a *perichoresis* of loving relations, these scriptural moments ought to inform our theology. The intrinsic relationality of the Trinity itself is one of unity through difference. To be sure, it would be heterodox to suggest that this agonistic relationality was violent or destructive. Violence would seem, for obvious reasons, to undermine the Johannine affirmation that God is love.[26] But if we take conflict at its etymological root as 'to strike together' the relationality of the Trinity – nascently affirmed in Scripture and developed by the early church – seems to include such virtuous and loving difference. More than this, it is significant that such conflict plays an essential role in the work of salvation. Without the struggle in the garden, we do not have the passion and resurrection. Without the advocacy of the paraclete, we do not have justification for sinners. Virtuous, loving conflict between the undivided persons of the Trinity enables the work of salvation.

If we can allow the possibility that conflict, understood as a normatively neutral agonism, plays a role in animating the intrinsic relationality of the Trinity, then the second argument for the goodness of conflict from salvation history is only more evident. This is a different argument than seeing conflict as a good internal to the life of the Trinity, but the two are related.[27]

In both the scriptural record and the history of the church, God has seen fit to constructively use conflict time and again to pursue salvific ends. While I find Bruce Kaye's model of conflict-as-finitude ultimately unsatisfying, I think his move to situate the current conflicts of the Anglican Communion within the broader story of God's salvation history is right. When we take a long view of God's acts of salvation, situating the story of the church in the story of Israel, we see that conflict has long been a part of who we are, how we have related to one another. God used Moses' conflictual encounter with Pharaoh to enable the Hebrew's liberation to worship in the wilderness. Jesus modeled constructive use of conflict in his confrontations with the religious and political leaders of his day. The disciples modeled it too when they decided in the Council of Jerusalem to include Gentile Christians within the fold. It is through these conflicts that the deposit of faith has been delivered from generation to generation. God's Spirit has chosen to work not through perfect communions, but through the sordid and broken lives of us mere mortals. Conflict plays a necessary epistemic and pedagogical role by bringing us closer to God's truth.

It is clearly the case that the conflict that serves as a means of communion can have a close relation to sin and finitude. Certainly, sin and finitude conditioned how God's people relationally engaged these conflicts, as well as so many others. The Israelites' turning away from God and exile, for example, is one instance in which sin leads to conflict which leads to God's salvific action in order to restore

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[26]See Augustine, 'On the Trinity', in Philip Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (trans. Arthur West, vol. 3; Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1887), bks. XV, ch. 17, available at: http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130115.htm.

[27]As Karl Rahner rightly argued, 'the "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity'. We cannot know about the internal life of the Trinity without knowing about its effects in the world. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (trans. Joseph Donceel; New York: Continuum, 2001), p. 22.

relationship between God and the people. But, this is not a necessary relationship. The example of the inclusion of the Gentiles in Acts 10–15 is instructive here. God's abounding mercy and love for all people, in this case, required conflict in order to draw the early church into conformity with this reality. Unlike the internal life of the Trinity, conflict here is due to the impact of sin. But, conflict is not itself a manifestation of sin. Rather, conflict is a means of grace, a vehicle for God's salvific work in the world. Without conflict, we would have no means of confronting and transforming sinful realities. In the Exodus, God through Moses confronted the sin of oppression that allowed Pharaoh to enslave the Israelites and force them to serve his imperial ambitions. The epic conflict allowed the Hebrew's liberation. While Pharaoh's idolatrous self-aggrandizement, militarism, and pride were sinful, the conflict urged and inspired by God and facilitated by Moses was not. Rather, conflict allowed the working of God's salvation in history.

My final argument for a positive theological account of conflict is the one taken most often by advocates of conflict transformation, namely the naturalness of conflict for healthy human relationships. As this argument typically goes, a natural, given part of human sociality, even the most loving and supportive relationships, requires some degree of conflict.[28] Now conflict is not the point, but conflict is necessary for relational health, for transformation. One scholar who has thought quite extensively about the goodness of conflict in human relations is John Paul Lederach.[29] An international expert in conflict negotiation and social change, Lederach has developed the field of what he calls 'Conflict Transformation'. Historically, academics and actors in the field of peace studies have described their work as conflict *resolution* or conflict *management*. Lederach has critiqued this framing of the task because he saw that conflict was often used as a tool for needed constructive change. To 'resolve' a conflict without attending to the relational and structural matrix in which a conflict is embedded can tend to reproduce the same problems in new contexts.

Basic to Lederach's account is a contrast between conflict resolution and conflict transformation. The key question for conflict resolution is, 'how do we end something not desired?'[30] By contrast, the key question for conflict transformation is, 'how do we end something destructive and build something desired?' These orienting questions diverge in large part in their view of conflict. Conflict resolution views conflict as a problem and 'envisions the need to de-escalate conflict processes'. Conflict transformation, on the other hand, envisions conflict as part of a relational ecology in which some forms of conflict need de-escalation, while other forms need amplification in the pursuit of constructive, relational change.

This insight about the potential goodness of conflict gains greater clarity and strength in the light of the first argument for conflict internal to the Trinity. If conflict is a constructive part of the unity that constitutes the life of the undivided Trinity, should we assume that good human sociality would not require the same?

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[28]This is not, as John Milbank might accuse, an 'ontology of violence' because I have disaggregated conflict and violence – an elision that leads to significant confusion in Milbank's work. See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2nd edn, 2006).

[29]Lederach, *Building Peace*; Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*; Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*.

[30]Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, p. 33.

It is my contention that if the persons of the Trinity have constructive conflict, and furthermore if conflict is a means of God's salvation history, we should not be surprised to find the same in our inter-personal and ecclesial relations.

How do we know, though, when conflict is destructive and when it is constructive? Or, put in terms of the models I have been using, how do we know when conflict is sin, finitude, or opportunity for communion? Answering this question, of course, requires discernment. But, such discernment should start not with a categorical rejection of the constructive possibility of conflict. Rather, if we disambiguate conflict from sin and finitude, we can shift the semantic field and make the case for what religious ethicist Jason Springs has recently called 'healthy conflict'. Drawing especially on Martin Luther King, Springs argues that healthy conflict is '1) oriented by the pursuit of justice; 2) marked by a practical, goal-oriented sensibility about the dimensions of power inscribed in the conflict, and 3) motivated by respect for the humanity of one's opponents (thus the grounding hope for eventual reconciliation), even when their actions must be denounced and resisted because they produce, or sustain, evil conditions.'[31] While King, and Springs in his appropriation of King, have in mind the US public as the site of conflict, I think their insights can be translated to apply to the global Church as a public, an *ekklesia*. In this case, healthy ecclesial conflict would be oriented by the pursuit of relationships in Christ, marked by a practical sensibility about the power inscribed in the conflict, and motivated by a common commitment to Christ in the other, even (and especially) when that other needs to be held accountable. And while these may mark a minimum of catholicity, Anglicans also have the unity of Baptism and Eucharist through which we participate in the unity of the Trinity.[32]

If healthy conflict animates the intrinsic relationality of the divine life, we should assume that it might also animate our ecclesial relationality. By being in healthy conflict with one another we might be one as the persons of the Trinity are one. To not acknowledge our conflict, to repress it in an ideological commitment to a false unity, does not produce ecclesial health. To return to the example of my waiter's failure to bring me the dish I ordered: my repression of complaint does not add up to right relationship between my waiter and me. Rather, because of my strange mix of food allergies, it means that by repressing the conflict I will be unwell. Rather than assuming, immediately, that conflict is bad, I have argued that we have good, theological reasons to assume that conflict can be a constructive part of our human relations. When I am in harmony with my spouse, it is because we have worked out conflicts not repressed, managed, or resolved them. Through conflict we affirm our relationship with one another, that we care about what each other holds most deeply, and we strive to deepen and extend that relationship. As we know from our familial relationships,

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[31]Jason A. Springs, *Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society: From Enemy to Adversary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 256.

[32]Participation is the key theological concept that animates Bishop Victor Atta-Baffoe's account of ecclesial unity. See Victor Atta-Baffoe, 'Living in Communion within Anglicanism', *Journal of Anglican Studies* 14.2 (November 2016), pp. 226-35. He retrieves this concept from Richard Hooker. See Richard Hooker, 'Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, Book V', in John Keble (ed.), *The Works of That Learned and Judicious Divine Mr. Richard Hooker: With an Account of his Life and Death by Isaac Walton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1836), II, chs. 51–56.

I want to suggest that we might see conflict more positively as a relational dynamic that when used well can lead to right relationship, to communion.

Toward an Agonistic Ecclesiology in the Anglican Communion

Reconceptualizing conflict as communion, rather than merely sin or finitude, has immediate practical implications. Affirming the potential goodness of conflict both critiques and commends certain practices of the Anglican communion. As Scott MacDougall has rightly argued:

> Communion is the space within which conflict is addressed. It is not a state characterized by the absence of contention, nor the result of agreement. Neither increased centralization nor coercion can effect it. Instead, communion affirms plurality and dispersed authority so that relationships forged in common hope, not structures, guide its corporate life and shape its kingdom-oriented mission.[33]

Critically, viewing conflict as a means of communion would discourage the high-stakes proceduralism attempted by the church and the fixation on specific episodes of relational crisis, while not denying the real pain of ecclesial division. Alternatively, viewing conflict as communion would commend understanding conflict as a means of relationship across the communion that calls all of us to return to the work of God's saving mission in the world. Let me take each of these critiques and affirmations in turn.

First, viewing conflict-as-communion critiques the high-stakes proceduralism that the church has too often focused upon as the solution to conflictual relationships.[34] The conflict that has reached the press has, on the whole, focused on disagreements at the highest levels, an elite-level war of words that has involved ecclesial celebrities (most often bishops) casting stones of aspersion. The response of church leadership has been to attempt to manage the conflict procedurally.[35] The purported solutions have been largely juridical, focusing on the so-called 'instruments of unity'.[36] Yet, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams rightly

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[33]Scott MacDougall, 'The Covenant Conundrum: How Affirming an Eschatological Ecclesiology Could Help the Anglican Communion', *Anglican Theological Review* 94.1 (2012), pp. 5–26.

[34]Fredrica Harris Thompsett, 'Inquiring Minds Want to Know: A Lay Person's Perspective on the Proposed Anglican Covenant', in Jim Naughton (ed.), *The Genius of Anglicanism: Perspectives on the Proposed Anglican Covenant: Essays and Study Questions* (Chicago Consultation, 2011), pp. 29–36, available at: http://www.chicagoconsultation.org/wp-content/uploads/Genius-of-Anglicanism-final.pdf.

[35]Kaye, *Conflict and the Practice of Christian Faith*, p. 8.

[36]According to the *Virginia Report* these are the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Primates' Meeting and the Anglican Consultative Council, though these are not as stable and authoritative as some would like. See Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission, 'The Virginia Report', in Anglican Consultative Council, James Rosenthal, and Nicola Currie (eds.), *Being Anglican in the Third Millennium: The Official Report of the 10th Meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council: Panama, 1996* (Harrisburg, PA: Published for the Anglican Communion by Morehouse Publishing, 1997). See also Norman Doe, 'The Instruments of Unity and Communion in Global Anglicanism', in Ian S. Markham, J. Barney Hawkins IV, Justyn Terry and Leslie Nuñez Steffensen (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Anglican Communion* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

argues that 'our greatest need in the Communion now is for transformed relation-
ships'.[37] Engaging the conflict relationally requires not merely elite-level negotia-
tions but, as Lederach has shown through his engagement with conflicts across
the globe, processes that involve mid-range and grassroots actors.[38] Rather than
top-down, Lederach has found that the most likely way to transform conflict is 'mid-
dle-out', with mid-range actors (such as priests and lay leaders) being key bridge
builders.[39] Parish and diocesan leaders need to develop partnerships across geo-
graphical and ideological boundaries, partnerships that can be aided by mission
organizations within the church. Feminist and postcolonial theologian Kwok
Pui-Lan has demonstrated the important role women have to play in the affirmation
of communion. She lifts up, for example, a group of more than eighty women who in
the midst of threats of conservative bishops to boycott the Lambeth Conference in
2008 'reiterated their commitment to remaining always "in communion" with and
for one another amid deep divisions over sexuality in the communion'.[40] Those who
want to engage conflict constructively within the Anglican Communion will focus
on these actors and the quality of relationships between them.[41] What should be
pursued is not uniformity, but communion within a catholic church.[42]

Second, and largely in keeping with the Anglican response, in addition to viewing
conflict as principally a relational (rather than juridical) matter, the conflict-as-
communion model would encourage us to engage both the episode and the epicen-
ter of the conflict.[43] Episodes are the manifestations of conflict, such as the mutual
recriminations that I examined earlier surrounding the 1998 Lambeth Conference.
They are windows into a much deeper relational epicenter of conflict. As windows,
episodes can both reveal and conceal. In the case of the Anglican Communion,
issues surrounding human sexuality are episodes that reveal long-standing divisions
within a church that is moving from colonial British hegemony to a dispersed
pluralism.[44] Readers hoping for an adjudication of the issues of human sexuality
that have been such a critical part of the relational dynamics at work in the
Anglican Communion will be disappointed by this essay. I have largely avoided this
not because there is not important work to do here, but because it can conceal as
much as it reveals. Conflict-as-communion requires that we work the episodes of
conflict in such a way that it enables us to develop our capacity for long-term

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[37]Rowan Williams, 'Archbishop's First Presidential Address', quoted in Kaye, *Conflict and the Practice of Christian Faith*, p. 166. See also Ian T. Douglas, 'Authority, Unity, and Mission in the Windsor Report', *Anglican Theological Review* 87.4 (2005), pp. 567-74 (573).

[38]See also Ellen K. Wondra, 'Problems with Authority in the Anglican Communion', in Pui-lan Kwok, Judith A. Berling, and Jenny Plane Te Paa (eds.), *Anglican Women on Church and Mission* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2012), pp. 21–36.

[39]Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, pp. 78–80.

[40]Kwok Pui Lan, 'From a Colonial Church to a Global Communion', in Kwok *et al.*, *Anglican Women on Church and Mission*, p. 14.

[41]One example that transpired on an elite level but is still positive is represented in the Final Report from the International Anglican Conversations on Human Sexuality called together by Archbishop Cary follow-ing the 1998 Lambeth Conference. See http://www.anglican.ca/faith/focus/hs/ssbh/hsr-bishops-1999/

[42]Ian T. Douglas, 'An American Reflects on the Windsor Report', *Journal of Anglican Studies* 3.2 (December 2005), pp. 155-79 (155).

[43]Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, p. 31.

[44]Kwok Pui Lan, 'From a Colonial Church to a Global Communion'.

relational engagement, thus healing the relational epicenter. Seeing conflict episodes as an opportunity for communion is spiritual work. It requires looking through the window of the presenting issues to see the relational context that lies beyond.[45] As such, we will need to talk about sex, money, and power and how these dynamics inform and deform our relationships with one another.

Third, my proposal that we view conflict-as-communion, as a sign of our commitment to engage with one another and with God in the pursuit of Christ's mission in the world, does not do away with the scandal and pain of ecclesial division, division that has at times become violent. What it does do, however, is to invite us to draw upon the tactics of conflict transformation as we think about how to engage with one another in a global communion undergoing significant dynamic change. These tools are indispensable as we seek relationship with one another. And the good news is that we are not left to these tools alone. Rather, these practices of relational engagement are animated by grace: the unity through difference of the undivided Trinity inspires and enlivens our own human communions, making relationships possibly where before there was only enmity.

There is no silver bullet that can solve the challenges that the Anglican Communion faces. However, I think reframing the way we think *theologically* about conflict could enable some new practices of communion in and through conflict. Anglican theology, from its very inception, emerged out of contestation. The earliest Anglican theologians, such as Thomas Cranmer and Richard Hooker, aimed to systematize and defend the newly formed Church of England against both internal and external detractors. In the first century of institutional Anglicanism, conflicts over doctrine were no small matter: they were life and death decisions that had lasting political ramifications. The fact that we are not killing each other over our theological conflicts is a very good thing! While the threat of death no longer hangs over would-be heretics, the question of conflict in the Anglican Communion remains pressing today, particularly as the Anglican Communion negotiates contemporary struggles over authority, human sexuality, and the mission of the church. While not life and death, social alienation and psychic well-being as well as the truthful witness of the church are all at stake.

God has graciously chosen to work not through perfect people, but through the broken body of Christ. Do we have faith that God can take us, as we are, and do a good work in and in spite of ourselves? I believe that God is able, and furthermore that through struggle with one another and with God that we might witness this good news to a waiting world.

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[45]Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, p. 49.