

Reframing Reality in Human Experience:

The Relevance of the Grubb Institute's Contributions
as a Christian Foundation to Group Relations in the
Post-9/11 World

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¹ *This contribution opens with some reflections on the significance of group relations thinking in the global context. Utilizing the transcript of a paper presented by Bruce Reed to a meeting of the Great Britain and Ireland Group Relations Forum held at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations on 21 February 2003, it outlines ways that The Grubb Institute has developed its own group relations work. Bruce Reed worked with John Bazalgette to develop the transcript Reed's paper and together they worked on sections of this essay until Bruce's death on 4 November 2003. John Bazalgette is responsible for the final version and wishes to acknowledge the contribution of his colleagues, but to give special thanks to Professor Kathleen B Jones for her help in reducing a very long paper, to Amy Fraher for helping to clarify the more obscure passages, to Karen Izod for her suggestions and encouragement about the final writing.*

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Framing Reality in Human Experience

Human beings seek ways to stabilize thinking about their complex, often confusing, environment. One way to manage our temptation to respond irrationally to the anxieties of life is to rely on frames of reference which can structure, shape and give meaning to experience, enabling us to feel as if the world is rational and orderly. Icons are symbolic markers that help to organize complex, sometimes contradictory events in ways that orient us to reality. As Rowan Williams put it, an icon is “a window into an alien frame of reference that is at the same time the structure that will make definitive sense of the world we inhabit.”² Although they do not constitute rationality directly, they provide shorthand explanations for our own and others’ behavior. Yet, icons can also be dangerous. Unless we remain alert to their limited purpose, the structure they offer can become reified and we risk treating them as more real than the world they help us to understand.

In this paper we propose to draw on two icons to frame what we have to say, exploring how iconic images have shaped the modern world and both helped and hindered our understanding of it. We explore briefly the differences between the anxieties mobilized by these images and the boundary markers of interpretation, which encoded those images with meanings designed consciously and unconsciously to contain anxiety. Against the backdrop of these images and their interpretations, we investigate the relevance of the methods and applications of group relations to the study of those negative and positive projections lying behind the mobilization of anxiety by threatening global events. In particular, we suggest how the approach to group relations in theory and practice which seeks to bring the human sciences and Christian experience into relation with each other, as developed at the Grubb Institute, can provide one way to develop a “window into an alien frame of reference,” a window which might enable us to better manage our anxieties and take responsibility for our own behaviour by becoming more accountable for how we are implicated in what happens around us.

Icons for Two Succeeding Generations

Icon No. 1: The mushroom clouds that hung over Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August 1945

For 45 years after August 1945 the world lived in the shadow of having seen terrifying examples of the human capacity to deliver mass destruction from a great distance with little risk to the deliverer. Both the spread of nuclear weapons and the constant threat of their use during the Cold War between the world’s capitalist and communist ‘tribes’ meant that two generations lived with the possibility of nuclear war and understood that possibility to be inextricably linked with the capitalist/communist split across the world. This possibility and its interpretation consciously and unconsciously affected local, national and international

2 *R Williams (2000) Lost Icons, Reflections on Cultural Bereavement T&T Clark , Edinburgh p2.*

structures, strategy and everyday life. In this sense, the icon of nuclear destruction provided a way to make 'definitive sense of the world' in which we lived by providing a mutual Other onto whom destructiveness could be projected.

Icon No 2: The vivid image of smoke and flame as passenger aircraft smashing into the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001

The destruction of the World Trade Centre opens up questions of great complexity. Both the ubiquity of the weapons of destruction used on September 11th and the relative anonymity of the perpetrators point to the greater amorphousness or boundlessness of this threat.

'International terrorism' is the name given to the 'enemy', an opponent whose profile and character are shadowy and intangible. Both the United States and the United Kingdom have initiated a 'war on terror' in response, first invading Afghanistan and then Iraq. However, these interventions seem not to have successfully contained the problem of terrorism even in those two countries.

The difference between these two icons is stark. Where we used to split the world into 'East/communist' and 'West/capitalist,' with all the underlying formal and informal controls needed to maintain a basic world equilibrium, we now lack a comparable boundedness or way to frame our anxieties, to define a definable Other onto whom we can project our own murderous natures, and through that definition devise ways of controlling their implications.. The destruction of the iconic Twin Towers has not yet provided us with a way to make 'definitive sense of the world' in which we live. Neither geographical boundaries nor ideological characterizations of readily available persons, groups and countries as 'evil' can provide satisfactory foci for the projection of our murderous capabilities. We are being tempted to frame the 'battle lines' in religious terms, principally Judeo-Christian/Islamic ones. Yet such a frame not only is inaccurate, it also relies on religious stereotypes that foster fundamentalist emotional positions, thus fuelling further aggression.

Another possibly more complex way to read this event is to see it as the sign of the impending collapse of such seemingly "Goliath-like" yet brittle architectural structures erected to represent Western-based trade interests under the impact of "David-like" blows of two unarmed civilian aircraft, hijacked by highly motivated men from poorer nations, armed only with the simplest of weapons. On this reading, one sees the destruction of these symbols of economic and political might as an indication of the real though masked fragility of the power of the wealthiest nations to attack at the hands of those poorest whom they have victimized, marking the event as a contemporary icon of the widening gap between the planet's rich and poor. Yet, this, too rests on a stereotypical conceptualisation and justification of violence.

If these frames remain inadequate, how can we find boundaries that might contain the new turbulence that is characteristic of today? Can we find ways to define differences, which can

enable us to distinguish between ‘enemies’ and ‘friends’ without merely mobilizing stereotypes?³

It may be that the very inchoateness of these times represents an opportunity for group relations as a field, challenging us to consider what ‘group relations’ is at heart today. Is it a *training method*: for increasing professionalism amongst leaders and managers? Is it a *marketing method*: publicising a specialism by which a body of consultants can attract and build up clients and earn a living? Is it a *career path*: whereby a person moves from being a conference member to joining a training group, to getting invited onto staffs, to setting up one’s own conference programme? Or is ‘group relations’ a *philosophy* for critiquing life in today’s world through a *process of identification with the other* which questions widely held assumptions about how we human beings live together on this planet, enabling us to develop another way to make sense of our experience of living together by challenging us to transform our behaviour, our roles and our social, political and economic structures?

Global political and economic structures in the second half of the twentieth century were bounded by the differentiation of the world into a capitalist/communist split, always against a threat of mass destruction. Not surprisingly, the earliest group relations conferences, which emerged out of the work of Tavistock Institute staff in the Second World War, developed within the context of this cultural and political bifurcation. Events such as The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the UK, the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, women’s peace demonstrations against the US Airforce base at Greenham Common and the escape of former communist spies such as George Blake and Kim Philby from British prisons, provoked group relations thinkers such as Ken Rice and Pierre Turquet to wonder whether their theories might provide a different kind of ‘*window into an alien frame of reference*’ that was both practically relevant to the world and to how to run a conference.⁴ Drawing on the work of Melanie Klein, Wilfred Bion and others these pioneers began to consider how thinking in terms of splitting and projection might provide a fruitful frame within which to explore global reality.⁵

As a result, conference preparatory staff meetings in the 60s and 70s began by reflecting on the political and social relevance of the upcoming conference and upon the meanings that could be discerned by exploring the processes of splitting and projection at group, institutional and societal levels. Only after tentative working hypotheses had been formulated about the wider political, economic, and social context did work on the programme of events begin. Indeed,

3 As Bill Clinton pointed out in his important December 2001 Dimpleby Lecture on BBC TV “The purpose of terrorism is not military victory; it is to terrorise, to change your behaviour if you’re a victim by making you afraid of today, afraid of tomorrow and, in diverse societies such as ours, afraid of each other. Therefore, by definition, a terror campaign cannot succeed unless we become its accomplices and, out of fear, give in.”

4 See for example Eric Miller’s Preface to the book he edited in memory of Ken Rice (1976) -*Task and Organization - Tavistock Publications, London*

5 In this regard, it is also important to remember that Wilfred Bion’s own formative experiences included being in the Tank Corps in World War I and re-habilitating soldiers at Northfield Hospital in World War II.

Gordon Lawrence recounts that Pierre Turquet would ‘lead the staff outside the immediate ‘skin’ of the conference to ... a questioning of the state of contemporary societies in the world’.⁶

In what ways can group relations continue to develop to respond to the challenges of living in an increasingly tumultuous 21st century? In order to answer this question, we turn next to the history of the thinking of Bruce Reed and the development of the Grubb Institute, charting experiences from the late 1940s until 2003.

The Grubb Institute and Its Methodological Innovations

In 1969, Bruce Reed founded the Grubb Institute, ‘whose purpose is to energise people to transform their behaviour individually and corporately as they gain insight into their experience of human systems, institutions, communities and personal relations when seen in the context of the Christian faith.’⁷ Reed trained in Australia as an architect, but was also educated in theology in Moore College, Sydney, Australia and at Cambridge University, becoming an ordained priest in the Church of England and Chaplain of Fitzwilliam House (now Fitzwilliam College) in the early 1950s. His increased involvement in pastoral counselling had a subsequent influence on his approach to the field of group relations:

“Beginning from a position of counselling people about their Christian faith in the context of the realities of society, I left Cambridge and offered to direct the Follow Up for the Billy Graham Crusades in the mid-1950s. At the end of every meeting I went through the hundreds of cards that had been filled in about those who had come forward at the end of Dr Graham’s presentation. The brief I gave myself was to select cards from professional people, some of whom were in key positions in society in business, government, education and social service. I phoned them, met with them, first singly, then in small groups. It was quickly evident that, while they may have seen going to church as a new and important activity, more significant questions were on their minds about what difference this made to their everyday responsibilities in the wider, secular world in which local and global movements affected the decisions that people made.”

Wanting to help people make connections between the ‘wider, secular world’ and their religious values, Reed and others founded the Christian Teamwork Trust in 1957. As he put it, ‘Christian Teamwork was set up to address directly the questions brought to us, called ‘concerns,’ which led to people reflecting about what the Christian faith meant in the practical terms that faced them in their work.’ They formed diverse teams ‘to work together to tackle those concerns in the most professional way we could,’ but engaging directly with the question

6 Gordon Lawrence (1979) - *Exploring Individual and Organizational Boundaries; a Tavistock Open Systems Approach* - Tavistock Publications, London (pp xiii-xiv)

7 This and all subsequent citations of Bruce Reed’s work are taken from the previously cited presentation.

of what relevance their experience as Christian and the teaching they were now taking note of, had to their work lives.

Examples of the composition of these early teams illustrate the possible range of application of principles to practice: an international marketing executive exploring the ethics of marketing; an engineering company executive concerned about how to work justly on labour-management relations; an individual who wanted to establish dignified independent living arrangements in the community for the elderly; explorations of questions of authority and leadership amongst young people; support programs for discharged prisoners; and ways to support the mentally ill outside of hospitals.

Drawing on his theological training, Reed worked with key concepts, such as ‘corporate personality’ - the group as a greater self, and ‘representation’ - the individual as expression of the tribe or group, both of which he saw as embedded in scripture.⁸ But Reed’s encounter with group dynamics, with which he first connected in the mid-1950s through a friend in Finland introducing him to the National Training Laboratory’s T-groups, led Reed to become involved with ‘studying what people were doing in the ‘here-and-now’’. This led on to his formulating a central question that remained the key motivation for his work for fifty years, shaping fundamentally the approach and techniques he developed:

“If I believe that God exists, I must assume that He is present in this group. If He is present, what is He doing and what real signs might I look for to test my assumption?”

Reed found ways to answer this question, which he used to develop specific methods of consultation to groups and for running conferences, initially through his subsequent contacts with Dick Herrick, Harold Bridger, and then later, Ken Rice, Pierre Turquet and Margaret Rioch, all three of whom he met at the Leicester Conference in 1963.

“The whole notion of experiencing feelings and being able to name them - dependence, hope, fear, love, hate - opened up exactly the lines of thought that I needed. In particular I now had a way of having an experience myself and being able to think about it. This has enabled me to see the relevance of named experience to my own understanding of life which I had until then been exploring through theological study.”

Following the Leicester conference, Christian Teamwork ran its own conference, “at first directed by Ken with Pierre, but then on our own behalf.”⁹

8 *A key theologian writing about corporate personality was Aubrey Johnson: see his book (1942, 2nd edition 1961) ‘The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God’ - University of Wales Press, Cardiff.*

9 *Ken Rice refers to this initiative in his book (1965) ‘Learning for Leadership: interpersonal and intergroup relations’. Tavistock Publications, London, pp3, 173, 179 and 189. We were in this way the first organisation to adopt what has become known as the ‘Tavistock group relations method’, followed 9 months later by the Washington School of Psychiatry, USA.*

Early on, it became clear that the innovations Reed inaugurated, combined with his sensitivity to working across differences, could have a wider relevance, a point we shall come back to later. He worked well with Rice and Turquet, despite the latter's atheism, even taking Rice's advice to "transform Christian Teamwork from ... a counselling service into an applied social research institute, taking the name of The Grubb Institute." He became interested in how group relations stimulated him to think about his experiences "as a human being." These experiences led him to investigate his own assumptions and those made by others, "and to seek to test them even to destruction," which, in turn, shaped the Grubb Institute's process of innovation and experimentation.

Structural developments

Although The Grubb Institute had already experimented with shorter four and six day conferences rather than the traditional fortnight of the Tavistock-Leicester Conference,¹⁰ in 1968 they launched a very important innovation known as the *Behaviour in the Working Environment* conference (BWE),¹¹ a "six month non-residential course designed to give participants time to digest the experience of the course, becoming familiar with previously unfamiliar ideas and their application while ... still in contact with staff and their fellow members. [It] opened with a full week group relations conference, including familiar here-and-now events, followed by six weekly Consultation Group sessions, another full week's course and a further six weeks of Consultation Group sessions."

During this course they

*"... made a vitally important discovery. We had been preoccupied with how participants could go about building their learning into their places of work. To address this, in the second phase of Consultation Groups, participants were invited to bring in a colleague to work with them on a practical issue they needed to tackle together. It became clear from this that, in the context of the Consultation Group, those who had not attended a conference could get in touch with and work with their own experience of their workplace in a way that was comparable to what conference participants could do. This offered them the same kinds of insight into unconscious processes in the workplace as those who had attended the two week long conferences. This realisation--that one could generate conference type learning without attending a conference--led to the development of what we called Organisational Role Analysis, which is now the Institute's way of working experientially in a one-to-one setting with those who head up working systems."*¹²

10 *Ibid* p173, 179

11 *These ran from 1968 to 1973 when the contraction of the economy following the oil crisis made the model more expensive than most professions could afford at the time.*

12 *See B D Reed (1976) 'Organisational Role Analysis' in C L Cooper (ed) Developing*
Continued on next page...

This structural innovation of partnering conference participants with those from the outside in a participants own work community is one of the many experimental structural innovations in conference design inaugurated at the Grubb Institute whose wider applications have yet to be fully plumbed. The ways that this innovation, which offers an opportunity for learning to colleagues who may be unable to attend an entire conference series or events, helping foster wider understanding of the operation of unconscious obstacles to group cooperation within and beyond an organization deserves further exploration and analysis.

Another innovation, launched in 1974 after an experimental run with Barry Palmer, was the introduction into conferences of what we called the Median Group.

‘We described this in the brochure as ` a group of between 18 and 24 members - the size of many councils and committees - which is too large to be taken in at a glance but not so large that members can remain anonymous’.¹³ Our experience as staff led me to conceive of the dynamics of this sized group as expressing the necessarily unstable relationship between a fantasied ‘included group’ and the fantasied ‘excluded ones’. Throughout the life of the group, participants move between experiencing themselves as either being included consciously and/or unconsciously in a sub-group of others, or feeling excluded from such a group and isolated from everyone else. No-one feels that they are part of the ‘included group’ for any length of time. Some may never feel a part of it”.

The relevance of this innovation to the discussion at hand concerns the ways that the fluid and flexible nature of those who felt ‘in’ or ‘out’ might be particularly appropriate as a learning environment in which to explore the fluidity of boundaries between “us” and “them” in our post-9/11 world, and, because it awakens such protean anxieties, might stimulate thinking about the arbitrariness of stereotypes and other “othering” practices. Given that the British Cabinet is usually between 20 and 24 members, this insight is of particular relevance in understanding the dynamics of intra-government relations and the underlying folly of Tony Blair’s decision to have members of Cabinet address each other in Cabinet meetings by their personal names rather than by role designation, as was the custom before.

12 Continued from previous page...

*Social Skills in Managers. London: Macmillan Press, pp 89-102 and A Mant (1976) ‘How to analyse management’ in **Management Today**, October. Other papers since that one have spelled out how we have developed this method and the concepts that have emerged from it, including Reed and Bazalgette ‘ORA at The Grubb Institute of Behavioural Studies: Origins and Development’ in S Long et al (in press) **Coaching in Depth: The Organisational Role Analysis Approach** - The Other Press, H Karnak Books, London and new York.*

13 See brochure **Leadership and Authority: A Working Conference on Group Behaviour in Institutions**, run at Trinity Hall, University of Dublin, 24-31 August 1974.

Two further structural transformations of group relations experiential learning design are worth mentioning. The first is the way that Reed and other members of his staff undertook a review of the ways that staff and director roles can get stuck, inhibiting learning. In the mid 70s, Reed became increasingly aware that, ‘having functioned many times in the role of staff member and Conference Director, there were many things that I was taking for granted as I designed and led conferences. In particular I realised that I could no longer be sure that I understood the reality of the experience of a member.’ He returned to a Leicester-Tavistock fortnight conference as a member, which brought to the foreground for him about ‘how little time the members have for reflection, being incessantly involved in all sessions.. [T]he members truly live in the *here-and-now*.’”

Finding the event one of those “` transforming moments’ for me as a Christian” he began to realise “just how members create a hierarchical picture of the conference system as a whole in their own minds, which can play into unconsciously manipulative behaviour by staff members.”¹⁴ Subsequent Grubb Institute conference designs attempted to address this in three ways. First, they attempted to break the hierarchical position of staff by ‘holding the Large Group as the first two or even three *here-and-now* sessions” creating circumstances where members knew enough about each other to chose the Small Group membership for themselves.”

Second, they tried to break through the “natural human proclivity to see consultant staff in exaggerated ways - demonising or idealising them...[by] creating a space for reflection by all the conference participants - members and staff - that had not been present in conferences at that point. In 1978, working with Gordon Lawrence and David Gutmann, they introduced the ‘Praxis Event’ early in a conference sponsored by the Tavistock Institute and the Fondation Internationale de l’Innovation Social (FIIS Paris).

‘In this Event, the task was negotiated with the members by the Conference Director and, once a statement had been agreed, the consultant staff as a whole relinquished their management role, which was taken on for the duration of the Event by the Conference Administrators. This meant that all the conference participants, consultants and members could now ‘take authority to be out of their framed, ordered places in the conference life so that they could look at the regular framed events with fresh wonderment.’¹⁵ Staff and members engaged with each other on the basis of the same role, with no use of ‘interpretations’.”

¹⁴ John Bazalgette had a similar experience when he also went back to a conference as a member after 15 years of taking staff roles.

¹⁵ This phrase has been used by Gordon Lawrence to describe his thinking about the need for the Praxis Event in his paper on its introduction to conferences: ‘Beyond the Frames’ in his book (2000) **Tongued with Fire: Groups in Experience** - Karnac Books, London UK p 141

In the Praxis Event, “each participant had to develop his or her own way of exploring reality rather than rely on a ‘staff role’ to do it for them.” With the exception of the overall conference boundary and general resource issues that the Administrators handled as Conference management, “all internal boundaries - time, space, membership of group or solitary working - were handled by each person taking part in the Event.” One of the key results of the event, and the reason why it has been continued and is relevant to the present discussion of managing boundaries in our more chaotic age, is that it provided an especially salient way to bring to the foreground the underlying dynamic human issues and created a context in which to “*explore how they are expressing their here-and-now experience of reality in practical action with others.*”¹⁶

The multiplication of such opportunities for applied learning would be one way to address the issues of power and authority in various work and social contexts that beset us today. In fact, Grubb has continued its efforts to provide members with as much authority as possible by handling ‘work on application in a way which gives members choice to work individually on issues declared in advance, with the opportunity to ask to work with specific consultants, though their choice is not guaranteed,’ calling this method Praxis Event II, ‘since it continues to focus on the members’ experience of the interaction of theory and action but does so now in the context of their working institutions.’ As we will discuss further, several principles that Grubb has evolved out of its work with institutions in context might be adapted further for work in other settings in ways that can address the particular anxieties which are represented in the destruction of the Twin Towers.

The third and final structural innovation Grubb launched was to challenge the conventional combination of the role of Conference Director with being a consultant in the Large Group, which Reed began to think distorted the perceived power of the Director. Instead, he developed an approach “to keep the Director out of all *here-and-now* events until the Institutional Event,” an innovation which has been replicated by some other Directors elsewhere.

Conceptual developments

In addition to these structural innovations, Reed and others began to modify some of the concepts they had inherited from Ken Rice, especially related to the concept of *primary task*, defined by Ken Rice as ‘*the task that must be performed for an institution to survive,*’¹⁷ and placed renewed emphasis on the proper understanding of this term as a process of ‘discovery that emerged in the light of reflection on experience and the analysis of reality’ rather than a purpose defined in advance of action. Stressing instead that the term was meant to provoke ‘a spirit of enquiry, a desire to find out what is happening in institutions,’ Grubb Institute work

16 Quoted from the 2003 brochure of the Grubb International Conference ***Being, Meaning Engaging.***

17 See AK Rice (1963) - ***The Enterprise and its Environment: a system theory of management organisation*** - Tavistock Publications, London UK (pp13-14), and EJ Miller and AK Rice (1967) - ***Systems of Organisation: the control of task and sentient boundaries*** - Tavistock Publications, London UK

began to use the terms *Aim* (intended outcome) and *Operating Process* (method of inquiry) in order to remain open-ended as to outcomes.

What became significant at Grubb has implications for our post-9/11 world. As we search for new ways to stimulate dialogue in different community settings, which can encourage conversation to generate its own purpose, remaining open to what happens, we are likely to stimulate, in a covert way, some of the same anxieties about the unexpected that have been mobilized by the wider political context. This becomes an opportunity that, if properly structured, can lead to group exploration of those anxieties in rich and rewarding ways. Of course, this stress on openness, or the 'lack of closely specified outcomes still presents problems for those from business, civil service and similar settings, who tend to think in terms of precisely defined and controlled results, and who are suspicious that such open-endedness implies lack of discipline and focus.' Nonetheless, it is exactly this suspiciousness that we must continue to investigate creatively, since it seems emblematic of the very anxieties mobilized in the contemporary global context. Consequently, The Grubb Institute has continued to use these key concepts both in conferences and in our research and consultancy.

Several other conceptual developments were important, but one of the key ones has been the development of the Reed Theory of Oscillation,¹⁸ which became a core text for theological students during the 80s and 90s. Bringing together "thinking about the function of religion in society viewed from the two perspectives of the human sciences disciplines of psychodynamic and systemic thinking ...with Christian theology, this theory "postulates that life is lived moving between two modes. One mode is where we are taking practical action in the world, seeking to realise our beliefs and meanings (whatever these may be) while functioning autonomously, mobilising our capacity to take risks." Reed named this 'intra-dependence', where the object upon which one is dependent is internalised, providing an internal reference point to the person. The swing toward the second mode of dependence occurs because "we encounter obstacles and resistances, ...become despairing and seek security, and regress to a place in which to experience to dependence..." This second mode he named 'extra-dependence', where the object which is depended upon is external to the person.

Reed understood that this oscillation process as natural, both for individuals and for groups. It is a normal process whereby individuals retreat, as it were for security, from the world, to be replenished, re-constitution, so as to be transformed back to being able to act effectively once again. In fact, he argued, "a stable and healthy society relies upon the underlying structures that facilitate shared regression and transformation in ways of which we are largely unaware. If the cultural and political context is designed to facilitate it, in this second mode we can "acknowledge our dependence - upon others for comfort and reassurance, upon writings or music, upon an institution (say the family or even the nation), [and] at the deepest level...upon God (this may be Allah or other manifestation of the divine)." However, he also argued that "a

18 *Bruce Reed (1978) - The Dynamics of Religion. - London UK: Darton Longman and Todd*

major issue in present day British society is that we are in a stage of deep transition where the familiar symbols and institutions (the monarchy, the church, parliament, *etc*) that used to facilitate shared national regression to extra-dependence, no longer serve that purpose effectively.” The crisis of underpinning structures and shared values to which Reed alluded seems to have been amplified at the national and international level by the symbolic impact of September 11th on confidence in any institutions and symbols, except weapons and institutions of destruction, to provide us with security and renewal. In addition, since one representation of the meaning of 11 September, to which we referred earlier, connects to religious conflict itself, the ability to explore ‘where God is’ in this context becomes even more complicated. Nonetheless, we continue to believe that it is now all the more important to consider how understanding the experience of reality can be provided by religious belief and spirituality at a corporate level.

The Context of Conferences and the Relevance of Context to Transformative Group Relations Work

In this last section of the essay we return to one of the themes established at the outset and offer some comments on how to develop a new iconic “window into an alien frame of reference,” which might enable us to better manage our anxieties and take responsibility for our own behaviour in the post-9/11 world. First and foremost is the need to be aware that any social or individual transformation requires taking account of those contextual pressures that influence meaning and behaviour, even though individuals and groups remain wholly or mainly unconscious of them. As Reed emphasized, conference directors need to remain “attentive to the wider political and economic context. The threats and opportunities for transformation more and more [provide] the backcloth to ...conferences. Although continuing to pay attention to the personal level of resistances and resources, we [should seek] to grasp realistically the impact of the global context.¹⁹

The significance of context is not limited to the fact that it provides only a setting for conferences and other group relations work, but that, in Reed’s assessment, it very much is the shaping force and drive of the work itself. Describing his own experiences, Reed noted how

“As I saw things happen across the world - the explosive growth and impact of the HIV/AIDS virus, the ethnic ‘cleansing’ in the Balkans and Central Africa, the growth of the ‘greed is good’ culture across the Western world, with the attendant corporate scandals of Enron and other companies - I was faced with the question ‘What part of me is represented there? And what reality-based action can I take when I have uncovered that part of me?’”

19 *The Grubb Institute is of course not alone in this. Alastair Bain and Gordon Lawrence had been seeking the same in such conferences as their Explorations in Global Group Relations in Australia in 1994 and 2002, and we at Grubb did it in conjunction with FIIS in Maryland USA in 1998.*

Such an attitude raised for Reed the question about how leaders needed to become more aware of how to “identify aspects of . . . unconscious processes within institutional life in its real context, in ways that enabled those in positions of accountability . . . to influence what was happening at deeper levels.” Yet, this question of accountability extends beyond the issue of what official leaders do in response to a situation; systems thinking allows us to see how we are all implicated in an event, even if we are not directly connected to it.

Systems thinking²⁰ postulates that every part is reflected in the whole and that the whole is more than the summation and the expression of all parts. For example, when a holographic plate is broken the hologram can be reproduced from every fragment. Of course, what might be the ‘whole’ in a micro-system, is itself also a ‘part’ in a macro system. Thus, whatever happens in the world is thought of as being related in some way (even if we cannot perceive the link) with the whole of the rest of the world. Systemic Thinking enables the Other to remain the Other, that is different from me, while still becoming One, that is a Person. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, this concept is expressed in the Second Commandment, which describes an inter-generational connection through the indication that God visits sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generations, although also showing mercy to thousands. This Commandment introduces a corporate dimension to sin - if one person sins, all are implicated, or held responsible, in some way - which leads to a different understanding of the nature of ‘original sin’. Thus as the aircraft smashed into the World Trade Centre, thinking systemically means seeing how each of us was vicariously a part of the hijacking and also a part of those who perished in the disaster. Similarly we are all implicated in both the invasion and the reconstruction of Iraq.

The destruction of the Twin Towers - the 21st century icon - represents, then, another context for exploration of what blocks accountability and responsible action in contemporary life, but it differs from other contexts, as we explored at the outset, because we do not seem to have any adequate maps available, however limited, with which to make sense of the alien frame of reference represented by this icon. If, during the second half of the twentieth century, Hiroshima and the ‘Cold War’ created a climate of fear across the globe it seemed containable because the ‘iron curtain’ marked a boundary across which splitting and projection could be rendered manageable and the creation of the United Nations with its Security Council. Yet, the aftermath of the Twin Towers atrocity has not yet been accompanied by the development of any comparable structure (despite the weakening of the UN by the invasion of Iraq), except a potential one between Islam and what might be called a Judeo/Christian ‘alliance’. Yet this division may be more fabricated than real, but if it becomes embedded will, without doubt, be an extremely dangerous one for the world.

20 *Ken Rice’s thinking was based on systems theory, especially drawing on Kurt Lewin and Ludwig von Bertalanffy. He focused particularly on boundary management between system and context. As experience and thinking has gone further, the scope of systems thinking has been extended. The work of Gregory Bateson, Boscolo, Ceccin and Palaozzi, and Maturana and Varela and others have focused on the energised interactions between parts and wholes.*

Group Relations and the 21st Century

In this current, fluid state of the world, what questions must we in the group relations community of knowledge and practice now address? The following seem most pressing:

How can group relations thinking help us discover a way into the alien frame of reference symbolized by the destruction of the Twin Towers that confronts the realities of the world today?

In what ways does the group relations' structure enable us to make 'definitive sense of the world we inhabit'?

What are the inherent weaknesses in group relations thinking against which we must guard?

We live in the post-Renaissance, post-modern, individualist culture. Two concepts are central to group relations and yet alien to most western cultures: understanding oneself, not as an 'individual' but in terms of 'corporate identity'; and the recognition that we are embroiled in unconscious processes which spring, not simply from us as individuals, but which are part of the wider systems within which we take roles.

The concept of corporate identity is still present in some contemporary cultures. Nelson Mandela describes in his autobiography, how he was brought up to see his own identity in ever widening circles: as a member of his family, his clan, his tribe, his nation and his people.²¹ He learned that each person is the embodiment of both their own uniqueness and of the corporate entity of which they are a part. It is probable that much of Mandela's universal appeal is that this corporateness is clearly evident in the way he relates to whomever he meets. George Alagiah, the BBC broadcaster who grew up in Ghana, has described the concept of corporate personality as "the uniquely African spirit of *ubuntu* ... The notion that one person's humanity is inextricably linked to the perception of humanity in others."²² The late Bishop of Winchester, John V Taylor, who was an African specialist, said "The European assumption is: I think, therefore I am (real). The Africans assumption is: I belong, therefore I am (real)." This means that, in order to feel real, we need a way to relate the person (a part) dynamically to the whole - be it a family, a tribe, a company, a country or whatever. The concept of 'role' can provide that.

21 *Nelson Mandela (1994) - Long Walk to Freedom - Little, Brown & Co London UK pp4-5*

22 *George Alagiah (2001) - A Passage to Africa - Little Brown & Co, London, UK p233*

A role connects the person effectively and efficiently to the system, potentially both to the greater benefit of the system as well as to the greater sense of fulfilment for the person. Indeed to learn to work in role is a major opportunity for personal development.

We have come to recognise that in systemic thinking, 'role' involves two aspects: an *inward discipline* whereby the person 'grows' the role in their own mind, first from identifying their own desire, and then from how they understand the system within which they will take a role: this means understanding the system's purpose and what the person's desire can contribute to the system. From this mental work the person can begin to consider and to determine their own behaviour and to manage themselves in the system's context. We have come to call this aspect the '*psychological role*'. At the same time there is the observable evidence of the '*outward behaviour*' to which others respond, drawing on their expectations of what they want from the person and how they interpret what they see the person doing. These expectations create an influential part of the context for the person which they must take into account as they form the psychological role in their own mind and which affects how they develop the self-discipline which they exercise in relation to how they behave. We call this external factor the '*sociological role*'.

Applying this concept in group relations work in the context of our post-9/11 world suggests the importance of investigating the ways that our projected desires can conflict in the wider system with how others are seeing us, who also respond through their own complex role definition process. A group relations conference provides a microcosm of the wider world within which we can learn to become sensitive to how others' perceive us in corporate terms. This is a major implication of this application of role to the contemporary context. The study of group relations opens up a way to further this process, based on the assumption that if we can become sensitive to the *here-and-now* of a situation we are in a position to identify our own resistances and defensive fantasies. From this we can experience a sense of reality and thus of being in touch with reality itself. The test of what is experienced is whether a hitherto chaotic, seemingly unintelligible state now becomes significant and meaningful, where the person has an '*aha*' experience which leads to transformed behaviour. That kind of experience can become a basis for new action. In terms of the global, macro-scale we can learn to understand how those from outside the West perceive the West. For many religions, the discernment of reality is symbiotically a discernment of God at work in a situation.

For ourselves at The Grubb Institute we have continued to be drawn to explore Bruce Reed's initial question about the reality in human experience from the 1950s: 'If God exists and He is present in this group: where is He and what is He doing?' We have set out to tackle this face to face, drawing on psychodynamic and systemic thinking, and our own Christian experience. We have called this approach 'convergent thinking', referring to the convergence between the

human sciences and Christian thinking in terms of understanding the reality of our experience. It is now the hall-mark of our work.²³

After 36 years of group relations conferences (most of which had been run without specific reference to Christian thinking) in 1999 John Bazalgette directed our first full scale conference working to the title *Leadership and Authority in Systems, in the light of Christian Spirituality*. Applying our learning from that prototype, in 2000 we designed a conference entitled *Being, Meaning, Engaging: Resistance and Transformation in Systems*, directed jointly by Bruce Reed and John Bazalgette, and in 2002 by John Bazalgette alone. In November 2003, shortly after Bruce Reed's death, we ran our third conference under that title, this time directed by Bruce Irvine, the Institute's new Lead Consultant. It is not that we have run new 'events', but we have used existing events in new ways, seeing the events as different lenses through which to explore experience of the *here-and-now*, seeking illumination of reality through the different converging spotlights of human science and faith.

The aim of these conferences is to enable people to manage their anxieties, memories, prejudices and beliefs through the way events are constructed, so that the *here-and-now* is experienced as 'reality' - from which one can start evaluating one's everyday activities differently. As a result, not only does one glimpse the *reality of that moment* but one is also in a position to turn and look outwards and 'see' the world in all its variations from two perspectives: that of psychodynamic and systemic thinking, and that of one's spiritual experience. The intention is to gain a better purchase on one's experience of reality, not to persuade anyone of any dogma be it a 'religious' or a 'scientific' dogma.

Those occasions when one has an experience of being in touch with reality, we would call 'transforming moments' and the process can be experienced as parallel to a religious experience. On such occasions, following Bion,²⁴ Bruce Reed referred to God as 'Ultimate Reality' and in those conference moments when one experienced being in touch with reality however fleetingly, one sharply sensed values in practice: for example, truth, peace, forgiveness, love, integrity, justice; as well as selfishness, envy, rivalry, betrayal, unfaithfulness, personal ambition and greed. Every conference has a context of values and beliefs which presages the values attributed to experience regarding resistance and transformation, regression and development. The test of that understanding is expressed through behaviour in the real world of life and work.

In his 2001 BBC Dibley Lecture, Bill Clinton made several significant points which are significant to the question of how to connect group relations thinking to the changing global

23 *In a broadcast discussion in the 1990s between two Oxford Professors, one of Physics and the other of Theology, they agreed that a definition that covered both their disciplines was 'The search for truth on the basis of motivated belief'. (Our emphasis).*

24 *See WR Bion (1970) - Attention and Interpretation - Jason Aronson Inc, New York, USA where he wrote: 'I shall use the sign O to denote that which is the ultimate reality, absolute truth, the godhead, the infinite, the thing-in-itself'*

environment. Clinton argued that the world future flourishing, which could enable completion of the process already begun through information technology, global energy sources and international travel, required that the world become a ‘*world without walls*’. He recognised that this necessitated human beings face up to their differences - of race, politics, economics, religion, culture. Although it is true, he argued, that none of us wants our grandchildren to grow up behind barbed wire, or exposed to the risks of ‘differences,’ which 11 September 2001 exemplified he cautioned us to remember that ‘*One of the big burdens of the modern world is ... The marriage of modern weapons to ancient hatreds. ... Don’t you think that it’s interesting that in the most modern of ages, the biggest problem is the oldest problem of human society - the fear of the other. And how quickly fear leads to distrust, to hatred, to dehumanisation, to death.*’

The fact that religious belief historically has been at the heart of the bitterest hatreds, and a war of beliefs seems to fly in the face of Clinton’s urging us to live inclusively, we at the Grubb Institute continue to address the relatedness of faith to learning to manage ourselves in this turbulent - nay, dangerous - context. In searching for truth using group relations insights, we have learned two major things, not so much as major new insights, but through deepening our understanding of the significance of things we perceived before but now with new sharpness. These two insights are 1) the relatedness of each of us to every other, and 2) the accountability that this imposes on each of us to think about how to act in the world, which we share with others who seem different from us, but whose ‘otherness’ is part of ourselves.

*No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main ...
Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind;
And therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.²⁵*

Group relations is a method of enquiry about ourselves not as isolates but as parts of wholes, to put it in our language as ‘persons-in-roles’. We are always in relatedness, but how do we differentiate between when we are observers, delegates or plenipotentiaries? Are we ready and able to be accountable for how we have been implicated in what happens around us? Relatedness is not wholly conscious: it is largely unconscious, so we human beings are always part of the dynamic of a bigger story than the one of which we are aware. Ken Rice started by using Bion’s Small group and progressed onwards to Large Group and Inter-Group Studies. Since his day the Institutional Event has been developed. Now we seek to study the widest possible contexts. Perhaps Gordon Lawrence’s Social Dreaming Matrix is one way to do this, exploring both inwards and outwards.

The danger of taking Bill Clinton’s comments on board uncritically is that his dream of the ‘world without walls’ would open us up to the unmanageable effects of unconscious processes,

25 *J Donne - Devotions*

and these are not all benevolent.²⁶ Human beings naturally draw boundaries in order to differentiate, to defend, to prevent ourselves going mad and to understand (and usually in that order). Clinton's unspoken challenge is to conceive of a boundary that can enable each to acknowledge the other -- with all their defences and the stress that involves -- while still being totally inclusive.

At The Grubb Institute we have set out to find, make and take our roles as members of the largest system we can conceive, that is, to become a citizen of the world. But to do that we need some frame or system boundary which both makes it intelligible but also enables us to split and project the unmanageable parts of ourselves without using other human beings as the object of those projections. To do this calls for each of us to develop the capacity to accept our incompleteness and our dependence on others, not as a sign of weakness, but of humanness. This becomes more possible when we can understand our experience of reality in terms of ourselves as *persons-in-relation* - as part of a whole which is greater than we can comprehend alone - which we can approach by disciplining our thought to attend to our 'self', in the context of 'system', and being in *role*. This calls us to pay attention to and seek to relate to those bits of ourselves that are carried by others. This is what we mean by 'inclusiveness'. From the perspective of the New Testament, this means learning to become a participant in the 'new humanity'.²⁷

But because we draw boundaries, we think of the world as ruled not just by tolerant, liberal, kind human beings, but also populated by people whose intentions can be harmful, which means we also need some object to demonise. We need an "Ultimate Being" or source of value, which can both be the object of our deepest hatred and also the source of the most comprehensive love. Such a being's nature and the principles embodied in its nature would enable justice and peace to be established and maintained. Religious systems create such a being in the concept of the divine. For the three monotheistic religions, the ultimate boundary between the One and the Other is between human beings and God, not between one human being and another. In all three religions it is forbidden to destroy other human beings in the name of one's God.²⁸

The test is whether the concept of "God's Kingdom" as a system, in whatever language we describe it, can provide the secure container that will enable us flawed beings to behave inclusively under the most extreme pressure, wherever that comes from. Yet, today

26 *It is worth remembering a frequent comment by David Gutmann: 'L'inconscient est beau'. (The unconscious is noble). Michael Dudley, a participant in the Institute's conference of 2001, remembers Bruce Reed saying in the conference Plenary Review 'God is to be found in the unconscious and a meeting with God is not something to be taken lightly.' (email of condolence on hearing of Bruce Reed's death - 23 December 2003).*

27 *See St Paul's letters to the Christians in Galatia (Galatians 3.28), in Ephesus (4.22-24) and in Colosse (3.11-12).*

28 *It is worth noting that all three monotheistic religions trace creation and human history through the same documents. Indeed in the 7th century many Jews, Christians and Moslems used the term 'Allah' to refer to God., and some still do so today*

fundamentalism -- not simply religious but philosophical, political economic and cultural fundamentalism -- has gained a fierce hold. The boundaries that fundamentalism enacts are drawn between human being and human being. And one of the fundamentalisms in Western culture which needs to be addressed is what has been called “*the learned repugnance, to contend intellectually, with all that is religion*”. Note the ‘*all that is religion*’ and not just Christianity, though in the UK today ‘Christianity’ is the most frequent meaning attached to the word ‘religion’.²⁹

Can a conference provide an adequate framework within which those vital - fundamental - boundary issues can be explored in the experience of the *here-and-now* of the conference design? Our own recent conferences give us some confidence that they can, but they need further testing. So far we have worked with a staff who have been largely Christian or sympathetic to Christian understanding: what will happen when we incorporate practising Jews or Moslems with Christians on the staff? Or atheists and agnostics? Individual thinkers have continued to press forward the case for taking spirituality seriously. Gouranga Chattopadhyay has explored the importance of a spiritual perspective in conferences, and related issues, from the perspective of yoga.³⁰ David Guttman and Shelley Ostroff have approached the same issue in their three day conferences *Body, Soul and Role* run in France, Belgium, Israel and England, and Shelley Ostroff’s *Group Relations and Gaia: a Conference on Health and Vitality in Institutions* run in Israel. Writings are beginning to appear about spiritual leadership and spiritual intelligence.³¹

To return to the icons: to Christians the Crucifixion is an eternal, eternal icon which is offered for use in relation to all aspects of human life. If we superimpose the image of the Crucifixion of Jesus upon the image of the two aircraft crashing into the Twin Towers, not concealing them, a new icon is created and a different ‘alien frame of reference’ now confronts us. Christ’s message from the cross is that we are simultaneously both perpetrators and victims in that act: those of us involved in group relations are able to investigate at conscious and unconscious levels our part in the rich, ‘northern’, developed world, recognising that we are also part of the poor, hungry, sick and imprisoned of the ‘southern’ hemisphere. Christ’s followers look at the Twin Towers, with the superimposed cross, and can see there the consequence of their own failures and in particular their rebellion against God: they are challenged to accept responsibility for this atrocity (similarly with the bombing outrage in Madrid in March 2004).

To be real in facing up to that awful burden, a follower of Christ remembers that from the cross, Jesus cried out ‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do’. But forgiveness and

29 Quoted by Archbishop George Carey in a speech to the House of Lords on 15 October 1999, initiating a debate on the role of religions in promoting international order and preventing international disorder.

30 Gouranga Chattopadhyay (1999) ‘A Fresh Look at Authority and Organisation: Towards a spiritual approach for managing illusion’ in R French and R Vince (eds) - *Group Relations, Management, and Organization* - Oxford, UK

31 See for example: D Zohar and I Marshall (2001) - *SQ: Spiritual Intelligence - the ultimate intelligence* - Bloomsbury Publishing, London UK, and A Briskin (1998) - *The Stirring of the Soul in the Workplace* - Berret-Koeler Publishers, San Francisco

release from guilt can only be activated through acceptance of accountability. We do not need to react to the pain, suffering and sense of outrage simply by seeking revenge and retaliation. The exponents of group relations know, from our experience of here-and-now events, that by accepting responsibility - taking up our own cross - new relations and new courses of action become possible out of events that seemed irredeemable. In the language of scripture this is the releasing potential of repentance combined with the experience of being forgiven and the receipt of God's grace.³²

Some Remaining Dilemmas

Our next step as The Grubb Institute will be to test the hypothesis that staff members from different faith positions can work together creatively in the interest of the members; and that this is possible when each staff member is secure enough in their own faith to enable them to address their experience from the perspective of learning.

Our group relations journey begins, not from a position of conviction or 'belief', but in a spirit of enquiry. This is a spirit of faith as opposed to belief - this is the Abrahamic spirit of not knowing where we are going. Doubt and ignorance are twin reasons for making the journey and twin resources to our intuitions.³³ Others may base their enquiry on other propositions. But for us the experience of certainty (belief) is a quicksand that, if we are unwary, will in due course entrap us. Concepts provide us with the tools which are our resources to our exploration of doubt and ignorance (faith). Differences are the 'seam' which we mine in order to understand, not to stereotype. Fear and hatred are necessary features of our lived experience but these are not the kind of fear or hatred that need to drive us into defensive destructive acts against others.

Truth is the object of our quest: fear and hatred can provide the energy necessary for exploration. And the truth we explore is the twin reality of the dynamic and continuing interaction between what lies within us and how that relates to what is without. The most significant hypotheses in this frame of reference are not simply about the transference and counter-transference between members and staff (important though these are), but those which illuminate what the conference reflects, in the *here-and-now*, of the external context of the world we live in together, which is impacting on behaviour within the conference.³⁴

What do we need to do to apply these principles and concepts to address the human and global challenges referred to by people like Bill Clinton? Can group relations reveal to us and

32 *Bruce Reed wrote a piece 'Our Response to Evil' on 12 September 2001 which expands this point (available for The Grubb Institute)..*

33 *French and Peter Simpson(1999) - Our Best Work Happens When We Don't Know What We're Doing - ISPSO 1999 Symposium*

34 *Again we are following sound scientific principles here. See for example A N Whitehead (1925 republished 1960) - Science and the Modern World - __Mentor, New York, USA where he wrote 'It is this union of passionate interest in the detailed facts with equal devotion to abstract generalisations which forms the novelty in our present'.*

hopefully to others, what is required of us in the realities in the global here-and-now to address those complex dynamics that led to the destruction of thousands of people, most of them individually innocent but corporately implicated simply by being members of the human race?³⁵

The answer to these questions lies in developing the practice of group relations flexibly and self-critically enough to apply its own methods to itself. Yet, the temptation, which has not been resisted too well so far, has been to regard group relations as a 'movement' in itself, splitting itself off into a supposed 'unique' position and then fragmenting into 'sects', as its different exponents believe they have the final truth (cf the frictions within and between the monotheistic religions so far - if it has happened to them, what is there to save 'group relations'?). Facing up to this fragmentation could lead us to a search for 'professionalised conformity' which becomes taken for granted amongst group relations exponents (a new tribe perhaps), rather than seeing every event as an opportunity to use the concepts as tools to explore the wider world in which conferences are set. If we fall for that, then the inevitable internal splits can become the causes that discredit group relations as a discipline.³⁶

Our experience in the recent Grubb Institute conferences has been that by regarding the *here-and-now* as the crucible in which God works - creating, redeeming and judging human endeavour - we have been encouraged to find that we can begin to break through those '*ancient hatreds*'. We have found that we can achieve through experience of the reality of the *here-and-now* the kind understanding of the roots of our own individual and corporate behaviour, which mobilises the blessings of modern technology.

If we are to avoid being what Clinton called '*emotional prisoners*' on any of several 'sides' and to realise globally in the twenty-first century the wealth *and* the peace that our technological sophistication can offer us, we exponents of group relations have little option but to press ahead on the lines we have described. We can look to improve our conceptual tools, not by restricting them to conferences, but by testing and refining them in the real political, economic and cultural settings of the world. And the signs are that across the world such things are happening, represented by such developments as our own *Being, Meaning, Engaging* and FIIS's *Body, Soul and Role*. Such efforts suggest the ways that group relations might enable us to find another window onto the alien world opened by the image of those two smoking, ruined towers that opened the twenty-first century, just as Wilfred Bion, Ken Rice, Pierre Turquet and others sought to do in the last half of the twentieth.

35 *Mannie Sher, in his reflections as Director on the last day of the conference he writes about asks about how members have been affected by the 'crazy images in society', suggesting that he is thinking in similar terms to ourselves. See M Sher 'From groups to group relations: Bion's contributions to the Tavistock 'Leicester conferences' in R M Lipgar and M Pines (2003) - Building on Bion: Branches - International Library of Group Analysis 21, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and New York*

36 *The late Barry Palmer commented on his experience, in notes written after taking a staff role in a conference in 1996 directed by Bruce Reed., that the 'professionalisation' of staff behaviour had covered up the more fundamental questions about why run the conference at all, overlooking what members would have felt they signed up for. This note was one of the factors that pushed the Grubb Institute thinking towards seeking to develop the direction it has taken.*

