

## Coventry Conference success

**Below Canon Paul Oestreicher gives his personal reflections on a recent conference on peace and reconciliation organised jointly by Coventry University and Coventry Cathedral.**

**The Cathedral and the University are natural neighbours, both in different ways in search of truth, both committed to equipping people to live creatively.**

They were joined on 8 March by the editor of 'International Minds', who is also Director of the Anglo-Japanese Economic Institute, in sponsoring an inter-disciplinary conference of a rare kind.

This year, the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, is a good time for social psychologists, political scientists and theologians to reflect together on whether reconciliation is possible in the aftermath of war. If it is, then what makes it possible in some situations and not in others?

Does the need to remember and at the same time to forgive make political sense? The underlying theme of this stimulating conference (which could not have succeeded without the commitment and initiative of Dr Kamran Mofid of the Coventry Business School) was that - in widely varying contexts - memory is essential if we wish to master the present and to plan wisely for a better future; but not memory weighed down by bitterness or guilt.

It was of great importance that George Bull, with his knowledge of Japanese life and culture, should have been able to share insights into Japanese perceptions that will make it easier to cope with the problems of Japanese involvement and non-involvement in our commemoration of the defeat of Japanese Imperialism.

The Japanese find it much harder than the Germans to be politically penitent. That makes reconciliation more difficult. But, as Nicholas Frayling, Rector of Liverpool was able to show, the English have that problem too. We live, in contrast

to most other nations, with very little awareness of our history. We live almost oblivious to the fact that "the Irish problem" is, at its root, an English problem. In this 150th anniversary year of the Irish potato famine, hardly anyone in England is aware that our policies drove a major part of the Irish nation to its death or into exile. We are vaguely aware of the glory of our imperial past, hardly at all of its shame.

In this year, when German concentration camps are remembered and when we are reminded of the suffering of British prisoners at Japanese hands, hardly a single English school-child is aware how many South African Boer prisoners of the British, women and children, died in the concentration camps we built at the beginning of this century.

Afrikaners will not forget and for that reason can, paradoxically, empathise in Mandela's new South Africa in a very special way with the black majority whom they oppressed. The Boers - when they finally triumphed in 1948 - did to the Blacks what the British had done to them. Apartheid had many of its roots in British colonialism.

But Sue Britton from Natal, a veteran of the struggle against apartheid, in describing South Africa today, was able to give the best of all examples of forgiveness after generations of oppression. Yet even there, a commission to uncover the injustices of the past is necessary, not to keep wounds open, but to enable them to be healed.

In the Middle East, just as in Ireland, as Dr Mofid was able to show, the road to peace is precariously being trod. Memory remains an essential part of that difficult journey and forgiveness is equally essential to its successful conclusion.

By the end of this conference it had been shown that the languages of politics, of social psychology and of

theology are different modes of addressing the same issues and coming to similar conclusions.

**Canon Paul Oestreicher**