



FORGIVENESS AND RELIGION: A SCHEMATIC APPROACH

Rodney L. PETERSEN

Boston Theological Institute, Boston, USA

E-mail: petersen@bostontheological.org

Abstract: Most world religions include teachings on the nature of forgiveness. These teachings provide an underlying basis for the varying traditions and practices of forgiveness in human cultures. In order to better understand religious contributions to forgiveness in light of heightened social and research interests, we might divide the religions of the world into three broad categories, the Abrahamic family of religions, the Indic religions and Aboriginal beliefs and practices. While this division is not inclusive and lends itself as much to overgeneralization as to clarity, it will nevertheless be helpful as we seek to understand a practice, forgiveness, which has been said to be a hardwired aspect of human nature. (**Keywords:** *forgiveness, world religions, religious psychology, Abrahamic religions, Hindu, Aboriginal*.)

NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS

One of the most striking developments in political life in the early twenty-first century is the attention given to stories of forgiveness and the evidence of the transformative power of forgiveness to effect personal and social change. The stories of people of diverse faiths and cultures seeking to find the way forward in personal or common civic life, finding the courage to reconcile with their enemies after wrongdoing is in itself remarkable. This is all the more striking given the cultural evolution that has brought us to the place where forgiveness is no longer seen to be simply the concern of religious people or a matter of irrelevance or an unworthy moral ideal in the face of injustice. Rather, forgiveness is seen to be integral to a world on the verge of destruction. (Bash: 2007, Pp.23-35; Helmick, Petersen: 2001.)

In one recent collection of narratives recounting the transformative power of forgiveness, Michael Henderson gathers together the stories of persons like Desmond Tutu, Benazir Bhutto, Rajmohan Gandhi, Jonathan Sacks, the Dalai Lama, and others in an anthology of hope toward a geopolitics of mercy. (Henderson: 2009) Weaving together threads of politics, inherited identity and history, wisdom and theology, Henderson gives us an account of how forgiveness has touched private and public life through processes of transitional justice and, notably, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, through examples provided by the Forgiveness Project and additional illustrative cases. With the move of forgiveness into the public arena, additional attention has come to be focused on the nature of forgiveness from university research departments and related disciplines in the arts and sciences as well as from schools of theology.

Such added attention has led to a clearer realization that forgiveness is not a concept that stands by itself. Its appropriate partner is justice while the end, or "teleology" of forgiveness is reconciliation. (Roberts: 1995, Pp.289-306.) When heartfelt and meaningful, it connects to decisions of re-humanization, decisions to re-engage persons no longer chosen to be perceived as enemies, the establishment of justice, the rewriting of

history and efforts at meaningful reconciliation, even healing an estrangement that is pervasive to human existence. (Gopin: 2005) Forgiveness can take the heart-wrenching massacres of Rwanda, the Balkans, the Middle East and Sri Lanka, for example, and turn them into a new political narrative. It can take the atrocities of Gujarat and inaugurate a deeper religious understanding. It can take the missteps of settler Australians and open new paths of cooperation with Aboriginal people. It can lead from shackles of slavery to the highest governing office of a land. Healing the wounds of history can take priority over waging war.

We live in a world of holocausts, gulags, killing fields, suicide bombings, and ethnic cleansings – all of which require the attention of forgiveness research and practice or they will overwhelm the politics of the twenty-first century.

The report launched by the World Health Organization in 2003 and thereafter, *World Report on Violence and Health*, asks us to consider the violence of our world as not only a political phenomenon but as a public health priority – as a leading cause of disease, as a matter of domestic abuse, as a factor in mental health and of concern for children and of central concern to the health of the next generation. (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, Lozano: 2002.) Forgiveness research and practice can help to chart the way forward and out of the spirals of violence that so threaten individuals and societies.

HOW HAVE WE COME TO THIS PLACE?

Forgiveness is a religiously laden term. It does not have to be, but it generally comes to most people through the wisdom traditions associated for many with the great world religions, all in process of contemporary re-evaluation. Without taking into account the history of those traditions and their scriptures, many of these religious traditions entered the modern era subject to re-interpretation or in association with modern forms of alienation, particularly in the West. Whether we think of the wars of religion dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – and their carry over into places like Northern Ireland – or the intransigencies and obscurantism in the face

of the evolution of knowledge, religion for many into the later years of the twentieth century was part of the problem, not a facet of the solution to the violences of the world. The cultural apogee of the modern world was expressed in the ascendancy of the sciences, rational explanation and advances of political liberalism. However, by the end of the twentieth century these verities no longer seemed to provide adequate means for the momentum of society in the face of the daunting challenges of nature and community.

A turning point in the recognition granted spirituality, if not always religion, can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century. [The religious reconstruction of the world after the devastation of WWII might be seen in the emergence of the World Council of Churches (1948), the role of religion (Islam) in North African and Middle East independence movements (1954ff.), the Six-Day War between Israel and neighboring states (1967), and recognition of the Bosnians as a distinct people based upon their religion (Islam) by Josip Broz Tito in 1969, significant for the autonomy granted Kosovo in 1974.] But interest in religion's role in shaping public policy has become an increasing reality following the Iranian Revolution (November 4, 1979), referred to by Madeleine Albright as "a true political earthquake, like the revolutions of France or Russia." The significance of religion, and what we mean by it, has become only a more pointed reality in evolving geo-politics since 9/11. The Iranian Revolution grounded politics in the debate over identity, set the stage for the end of the Cold War, and drew us rapidly to events often identified as the "War on Terror." Politics since 1979 has become identity politics – since then often a religious contest. Theology has become public theology in a new way, often shaped by the tensions of religious fundamentalism and post-modernism. The point is made by Ernest Gellner that three basic options of belief are available today, described as "Religious fundamentalism," "Relativism, as exemplified by the recent fashion of 'postmodernism,'" and "Enlightenment rationalism or rationalist fundamentalism"; the latter for Gellner, with its empiricist rationalism, is the only belief system which can survive long-term. (Gellner: 1992.)

An interest in spirituality finds its own ascendancy in the twentieth century following the atrocities associated with WWII, the anxieties of the Cold War period, and in the dislocations and civil wars wrenching political life into our own current period. The deeds done in the interest of empire, the atrocities committed through the idealisms of the twentieth century, the violence arising from human insensitivity, greed and fear are now subject to questions of forgiveness, reparative justice and the search for reconciliation – ideas embedded in the spiritualities associated with the wisdom traditions and their expression in the world's great religions. (Robinson: 2004)

If the institutions of religion are not always attractive, and often seen to be caught up in the very problems we face, a mystical and often privatized spirituality is seen to be a safe haven for personal solace and meaning. Spirituality, it has been said, is "our search for purpose or meaning involving both transcendence (the experience of existence beyond the physical/psychological) and immanence (the discovery of the transcendent in the physical/psychological)." Religion is

the more organized and communal attempt to facilitate and interpret that search. (Robinson: 2004, p.278) Both spirituality and its more organized expression, religion, bear upon our understanding of forgiveness and its related movements in justice and toward reconciliation.

RELIGION INFORMING PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

If the politics and psychology of the current period have brought us to spirituality and religion, religion as enveloped in what we might call the wisdom traditions can inform the social sciences in the ways of forgiveness. These traditions can provide case studies as well as an appreciation for the ways by which persons and communities have dealt with conflict through the centuries. In addition to providing a laboratory of historical experience, psychological research increasingly illustrates how impulses from the religious traditions influence the psychological processes involved in forgiveness. [Three examples of contemporary research include: Robert Enright and the Human Development Study Group at the University of Madison, WI, have illustrated how forgiveness leads to improved physical and mental health and better relationships. (Enright: 2001) Working out of the Department of Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University, Everett Worthington has developed an evidence-based approach to illustrate the effectiveness of forgiveness and reconciliation. (Worthington: 2006) Michael McCullough, in *Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct* (Jossey-Bass, 2008), argues that despite popular belief that revenge is a disease, both revenge and forgiveness have been adaptive for our species. While acknowledging that cycles of revenge seem unbreakable, he sees evidence of humanity's collective will to break these cycles through innovative behavior such as restorative justice and truth and reconciliation commissions and humanity's hardwired impulse to forgive.] For example, psychologist Everett L. Worthington has studied the motivations that reduce interactions with one who has hurt us. (Worthington, Jr: 1998) Another researcher, Joanna North, writes, "Forgiveness is a matter of a willed change of heart, the successful result of an active endeavor to replace bad thoughts with good, bitterness and anger with compassion and affection." Stages of forgiveness are detailed by Michelle Nelson, detached, limited, and complete along a road toward healing. (Enright, North: 1998, p.20)

But religion does not come to the topic of forgiveness with one voice. Different wisdom traditions, set in different frameworks for understanding the world, offer different nuances to the concept of forgiveness that can help social scientists appreciate the impact of different religious conceptualizations, that forgiveness is not a monolithic concept, but can also help theologians and practitioners of religion appreciate better the contributions of different religious positions to the difficult question of personal and social healing that can accompany forgiveness. (McCullough, Pargament, Thoresen: 2001, Pp.17-40) As such, forgiveness might be seen as a commitment to a way of life and practice. (Jones: 1995) It might be defined as a commitment of the will. (Suchoki: 1995) It may also imply that which entails liberation from the past. (Müller-Fahrenholz: 1996/1977) Forgiveness might focus upon and be seen as

applicable to the secular realm and public policy. (Shriver: 1995; Shriver: 2005) Different traditions of human religious expression have contextualized and defined forgiveness differently. All of this bears upon the research and practice of forgiveness.

**THREE APPROACHES TO FORGIVENESS
AMONG THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS**

Most world religions include teachings on the nature of forgiveness, and many of these teachings provide an underlying basis for the varying traditions and practices of forgiveness. In order to better understand religious contributions to forgiveness in light of heightened social and research interests, we might divide the religions of the world into three broad categories, the Abrahamic family of religions, the Indic religions and aboriginal beliefs and practices. While this division is not inclusive and lends itself as much to overgeneralization as to clarity, it will nevertheless be helpful as we seek to understand a practice that has been said to be a hardwired aspect of human nature. (McCullough: 2008)

Forgiveness functions in important, if also different ways in the Abrahamic family of religions, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For each of these three faiths, forgiveness is worked out in the context of historical events; it relates to the maturation of personal relationships; and it is shaped by an understanding of God, the ontological grounding for the human personality and of faith, the very structure of understanding that is monotheistic, transcendent and capable of an immanent relationship with human personality. The nature of one's relationships with others, standing in a similar relationship to the divine, is said to be illustrative of one's relationship with God. While differences exist, there are deep affinities in these three faith traditions as illustrated in their scriptures. (Swidler, Duran. Firestone: 2007, Pp.198-99.)

While there are important and different emphasizes given the concept of forgiveness in the Abrahamic family of religions, the idea and practice of forgiveness, within the Indic family of religions finds a general grounding in existential compassion. While this is, perhaps, clearest in Buddhism, it is also present in elements of Hindu and Jain religious thought and practice. (McCullough, Pargament, Thoresen: 2000, Pp.17-40) Buddhism has been noted for several outstanding peace-makers who have worked out of this framework of meaning. For example, since 1988 and the outbreak of the pro-democracy movement, Aung San Suu Kyi, one of the most visible leaders in the non-violent pro-democracy movement, has worked to connect forgiveness with compassion and wisdom through principles of right intention (*cetna*) and compassion (*metta*). (Hunt: 2004, p.40.) Forgiveness is connected with mindfulness, as advocated by Maha Gosananda (Supreme Patriarch of Cambodia), rooted in the present moment where there is no room for such negative emotions as hatred, anger, and revenge, etc. Another prominent Buddhist proponent of forgiveness is the Dalai Lama at the heart of whose peace philosophy is the ability to cultivate forgiveness. (Dalai Lama, Chan: 2004, p.46)

Aboriginal and indigenous religion, essentially tribal

and animistic, shares in a belief that the ever-present spirits are at work in human beings and nature alike. There is no sharp distinction between the sacred and secular, between the spirits and the essential unity of nature and humanity. In the case of personal and community infractions, there is often a preference for teaching and healing, and away from punishment, as among the North American Tlingits, bringing offenders to a "healing circle" with all parties involved in the dispute. Emphasis is placed upon restoration to community for in many aboriginal or native cultures a real harm has been done to everyone. (Ross: 1996, Pp.17-18) One finds parallels among the Maori, the Aboriginal people of New Zealand. An emphasis upon a holistic circle, whether in aboriginal and indigenous groups as different as those in the South Pacific or North America, is toward restoration of social and individual health in the aboriginal community, but also carries a deep source of shared meaning seen in a recent "discovery" by North American Mi'kmaq people. In an effort to restore their language to everyday use, it is said that they "found" an ancient verb tense that had fallen into disuse, a tense specifically designed to say to everyone: "This event has been concluded to the satisfaction of all." In English, they have called this the "Forgiveness Tense." It is a way of implying to the entire community that victims are healed, offenders restored and the community able to put behind the infraction encountered. (Ross: 1996, Pp.188-189)

Research will continue on the nature of forgiveness, as to whether humanity is hardwired to forgive or whether forgiveness is a part of evolving culture. The three families of religion noted here, Abrahamic, Indic and Aboriginal – while distinct in many ways – illustrate three different approaches to forgiveness in human experience, that which is tied to a theistic conception of God, that which is existential and related to compassionate living, and that which is shaped by the interests of restorative justice and community life. Each of these three ways of understanding forgiveness deserves further research for what it offers to the healing of persons and communities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Bash, Anthony. 2007. *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Enright, Robert D. 2001. *Forgiveness Is a Choice: A Step-By-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*. American Psychological Association.
- Enright, Robert D. & North, Joanna. Eds. 1998. *Exploring Forgiveness*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin.
- Gellner, Ernest. 1992. *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*. New York: Routledge.
- Gopin, Marc. "The Heart of the Stranger," Pp.3-21 in Tombs, David & Liechty, Joseph Eds. 2005. *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions in Theology*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate.
- Helmick, Raymond G., Petersen, Rodney. 2001. *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation*. Philadelphia: Templeton Press.
- Henderson, Michael. 2009. *No Enemy to Conquer:*

- Forgiveness in an Unforgiving World*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
- Hunt, Scott A. Ed. 2004. *The Future of Peace. On the Front Lines with the World's Great Peacemakers*. New York: HarperOne.
- Jones, L. Gregory. 1995. *Embodying Forgiveness. A Theological Analysis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Krug, Etienne G., Dahlberg, Linda L., Mercy, James., Zwi, Anthony B., & Lozano, Rafael. 2002. *World Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- Dalai Lama, Chan, Victor. 2004. *The Wisdom of Forgiveness. Intimate Conversations and Journeys*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- McCullough, Michael. 2008. Ed. *Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- McCullough, Michael E., Pargament, Kenneth I., & Thoresen, Carl E. 2001. *Forgiveness. Theory, Research , and Practice*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- McCullough, Michael. 2008. *Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Press.
- Müller-Fahrenholz, Geiko. 1996. *The Art of Forgiveness. Theological Reflections on Healing and Reconciliation*. Geneva: WCC Publ.
- Roberts, Robert. 1995. "Forgivingness." Pp.289-306 in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1995)
- Robinson, Phyllis Fierro. 2004. "The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Post-Conflict Reconstruction," Pp.278-298 in Ewald, Uwe & Turković, Ksenija. *Large-Scale Victimization as a Potential Source of Terrorist Activities*. Amsterdam: ISO Press.
- Ross, Rupert. 1996. *Returning to the Teachings. Exploring Aboriginal Justice*. Toronto, Canada: Penguin Books.
- Shriver, Jr., Donald W. 1995. *An Ethic for Enemies. Forgiveness in Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Shriver, Jr., Donald W. 2005. *Honest Patriots. Loving a Country Enough to Remember its Misdeeds*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Suchoki, Marjorie. 1995. *The Fall to Violence. Original Sin in Relational Theology*. New York: Continuum Press.
- Swidler, Leonard., Duran, Khalid., & Firestone, Reuven. 2007. *Triologue. Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Dialogue*. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications.
- Worthington, Jr., Everett L. 1998. *Dimensions of Forgiveness. Psychological Research and Theological Perspectives*. Philadelphia: Templeton Press.
- Worthington, Everett L. 2006. *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Theory and Application*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.