

Remorse and Forgiveness: A Contemporary Political Discussion

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ABSTRACT The theme of 'forgiveness in politics' has come to occupy considerable attention in recent times. Yet politics is seen as one of the most difficult spheres for ideas relating to forgiveness to flourish. Dubbed as a private virtue with religious moorings, it has nonetheless proven to be useful in countries recovering from conflict, particularly when the oppressors and the victims share the same territory and a common destiny. This paper seeks to make a case for forgiveness and apology in public affairs drawing on the contributions of the main exponents of forgiveness in the contemporary world, even as it identifies some of the moral and practical difficulties of its operationalisation.

INTRODUCTION

*If one by one we counted people out
For the least sin, it wouldn't take us long
To get so we had no one left to live with.
For to be social is to be forgiving*

(Robert Frost)

Political theory has been generally wary of looking at themes like forgiveness as a public virtue. This is because "forgiveness appears to be a rather softheaded, unrealistic way to respond to anything political" (Digeser 1998: 700). Janover says: "Against the backdrop of a world in which hatred and resentment loom larger than amity and recognition, forgiveness appears an oddly idealistic theme to emerge as central to some recent political thinking" (2005: 222). As a theme most clearly articulated in the Christian scriptures, forgiveness came to be understood as an apolitical virtue, a derivative of love, a largely private matter. Political thinkers have also neglected forgiveness for the same reasons. Political realism upholds the principle of autonomy of politics, i.e. moral principles derived from interpersonal life cannot be applied to the political world, which is governed by a different set of rules. Accordingly, although individual victims can forgive their offenders, institutions cannot.

There is now increased recognition that forgiveness can have a healing effect on societies torn apart by conflict. Calls for forgiveness as a means to address lingering social wounds and historical wrongs also abound. The adoption of this strategy in more than twenty nations such as Sierra Leone, Argentina, Peru, Kenya, Ecuador, Solomon Islands and East Timor and the increa-

sing flurry of interest in establishing Truth Commissions in many parts of the world suggest that the idea of forgiveness has now come to occupy some space in the social and political imagery of people everywhere. The experiment of Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa that allowed the former oppressors to acknowledge their guilt and reconcile with the victims following the dismantling of the apartheid system, despite its several shortcomings, has been hailed as a path-breaking attempt at conflict transformation. Regarding the scope of these commissions, we have examples like the South African commission which took on board "reconciliation" suggesting a broader approach to post-conflict peace building, while others like Peru decided to focus on "truth", leaving out "reconciliation" given its controversial character (Avruch 2010).

Just as revenge can be used to stir passions, forgiveness can also be used to stir emotions based on recognition of a shared future. Governments are now seeking forgiveness from their former colonial subjects, dictators from political prisoners in post-dictatorship phase, former terrorists from their innocent victims, banks and businesses from their looted or polluted clients, and churches and cults from victims whom they had abused or persecuted. Hence, forgiveness and the process of reconciliation are modern manifestations of an emotionally assisted, human problem-solving capability that we possess to extricate ourselves from the hate trap.

Forgiveness is a subject of interdisciplinary enquiry. Scholars who have discussed the theme come from diverse backgrounds such as political science, theology, psychology, sociology, peace

studies, philosophy and literary studies. Questions of morality and justice have been receiving growing attention in politics particularly in the last three decades. Apologising to victims and making amends for past injustices have become a part and parcel of both national politics and international diplomacy. In recent years, President Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder – all powerful leaders of the industrialized West – have apologized and repented for gross historical crimes and violation of human rights. Although these efforts might not have enthused the victims or absolved the governments or other organized groups of their wrongdoing, moral issues have come to the forefront of politics more than ever, thereby creating some kind of a ‘national self-reflexivity’. A central dilemma facing many countries that are making a transition from an oppressive authoritarian state to democracy is what to do with the human rights abusers of the past regime. Managing the past has become a problem for many nations, whether it is the Nazi atrocities in Germany, apartheid in South Africa or slavery in the US. Forgiveness and apology are often conceived to be the way forward in such situations provided the society is able to find such ideas culturally acceptable or justifiable on religious grounds. Forgiving implies both an internal feeling and explicit behaviours, and the occurrence of one need not automatically lead to the other. However, forgiveness in politics has significance only to the extent it can be expressed in the form of symbolic public acts targeted at a wider audience. No student of politics can ignore such symbolic public acts. This paper seeks to explore the case for forgiveness in politics and the key issues surrounding its application drawing on the contributions of key exponents of the theme in our contemporary world.

What is Political Forgiveness?

We can think of political forgiveness as a process by which wrongs committed by one group against another group are sought to be moderated through truth telling, expression of sorrow or rendering of a public apology, calls for forgiveness, renunciation of vengeance, mitigation or, in some cases, cancellation of a deserved penalty so that the victims as well as the offenders are able to achieve some degree of reconciliation. It is one of the important sources of nonviolent

social change. The forgiving party makes a conscious choice to forego vengeance, thus breaking the cycle of action and reaction (Shriver 1995). Forgiveness and the related concept of apology are richly imbued with transformative possibilities for victims and perpetrators. It implies admission of guilt, which may have a theological tenor about it. But, as Diegeser (1998) suggests, if forgiveness cannot be practised by individuals in their private lives, it is even more difficult to do so in public life. Unlike forms of forgiveness that are unconditional and do not wait for the other side to reciprocate, political forgiveness is predicated on reasons in the absence of which the citizens are not expected to forgive, according to him. In other words, political forgiveness should have a certain degree of instrumentality about it.

Forgiveness liberates victims from their burden of ‘victimhood’, grants some degree of relief to the perpetrators who feel sorry for their actions, and helps to mend ruptured relationships. Forgiveness is taking control of our past in a way that allows us to move on. This involves how we manage our mutual relationships. It is here that politics comes into the picture. Politics can be interpreted in different ways, in terms of struggle for power, the process through which resources are allocated within society and the manner in which a society tries to achieve transformation of its lingering conflicts and move forward. When the former enemies decide to stay together and adopt an associative strategy in the post-conflict situation, it is a form of politics that could be described as ‘virtuous’, a form that is closer to the Aristotelian project of achieving ‘good life’. Forgiveness frees human beings from their past actions whose consequences they had not foreseen or had not come to terms with (Arendt 1958). The goal of forgiveness is the healing of persons and the restoration of relationships through an interactive process between offenders and victims, where the former admit responsibility for the harm done and feel sorry about it, and the latter are prepared to look at the perpetrators with a certain degree of empathy and forgo the option of revenge, though not removing altogether the possibility of punishment. For example, Václav Havel sought to nurture empathy by reminding his fellow citizens that everyone was morally responsible for the contaminated moral environment. While it may have been easy to blame Communist activists for the problems of Czech

society, Havel reminded his audience that “none of us is just its victim; we are also its co-creators” (1997: 4). In forgiveness, the perpetrator, even while acknowledging culpability, tries to turn over a new leaf by distancing the ‘old self’ that was responsible for the pain and suffering. It may involve some or all of the following acts:

1. Apology, confession (truth telling) and request for forgiveness
2. Expressions of repentance and the promise not to repeat the wrong.
3. Offers to make amends – reparations

Political forgiveness is particularly known for its potential to promote peace and reconciliation. Although reconciliation can take place even without forgiveness, restoration of communal relationships on a more secure footing demands that the victims come to recognize the humanity of the offenders. Digeser (2001: 20-21) suggests that political forgiveness can promote both the process and the state of reconciliation by fostering trust and understanding among antagonists, a framework that “settles the past and opens possibilities for the future.” This is the reason deeper conflict resolution, known as conflict transformation, often accompanies both apologies and empathetic forgiveness. Aleksander Solzhennitsyn argues that mutual repentance is essential in politics, especially in overcoming intractable political conflict. In his view, mutual repentance is the chief means to the building of new relationships (1974: 133-34).

Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida on Forgiveness

Forgiveness is part of a moral code that is both distinctive to and absolutely necessary for political life, according to Hannah Arendt, a political philosopher whose writings continue to inspire and influence a number of thinkers and social activists even now. In fact, it was Arendt who secularized the theme of forgiveness by removing it from the theological realm and positioning it within the mainstream of politics. She credits Jesus of Nazareth as “the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in human affairs” and draws on passages from the New Testament to explain the character and working of forgiveness (Arendt 1958) without attributing any divinity to Christ. A German Jew who suffered in the Nazi era, she talked about the possibility of forgiveness in politics at a time when most victims were

thinking in terms of retribution and restitution. She said: “Forgiving.... is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it. ...Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever...” (Arendt 1958: 240-1).

Arendt dwells on the problem of irreversibility of certain actions of human beings and how this problem can be addressed, at least partially. Arendt finds the answer in forgiveness. She insists that the faculty of forgiveness has an inherently political side to it, and this faculty is necessary more than ever to redeem the public realm. Arendt describes forgiveness as one of the most important human capacities and the boldest of human actions, thereby removing any semblance of weakness being attached to it.

For Arendt, if the very basis of forgiving is destroyed, it amounts to ruling out the possibility of forgiveness altogether. She cited the holocaust as a case in point. Arendt tells us that it is respect rather than the apolitical notion of love that should inform political forgiveness. Respect is a regard for the *other* person from a distance (Arendt 1958). This has an Aristotelian flavor about it. In a similar manner, Martha Nussbaum says that forgiveness should be built on compassion rather than mercy in that the latter presupposes the existence of a giver and receiver, a hierarchy, which is absent when compassion is applied (Nussbaum 2001). For Arendt forgiveness is a power that must be mobilized by human beings towards each other before they can expect forgiveness from God. To do so would imply recognition of the fact that we are all mortal beings living in a fragile world needing mutual forgiveness.

Derrida says that you need to forgive unilaterally even when it is not being asked by the guilty. This is his notion of pure forgiveness. He calls the reciprocal forms of forgiveness motivated and instrumental, and therefore less pure. Real forgiveness amounts to forgiving the unforgivable, according to him. Derrida goes on to argue that pure forgiveness has nothing to do with the public or political sphere (2001). Forgiveness in the service of political reconciliation, normalization and peace is an interested or instrumental forgiveness whereas pure forgiveness is an end in itself. His position is that

"Forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable" (2001: 32). Derrida says that when forgiveness is applied to the realm of politics, there is a logic of exchange or economics involved in the process, that is, one gives it when the offenders ask for it, when they repent. Govier does not think that unilateral forgiveness serves any purpose in politics. Forgiveness must be both offered and accepted (2002). She has suggested, "no-one is absolutely unforgivable, whatever he or she may have done in the world", because to deem people unforgivable "is to ignore their human capacity for moral choice and change, which is the very foundation of human worth and dignity" (Govier 1999: 71).

APOLOGY

Some dismiss apologies as empty symbolic politics. But apology is a political act of considerable import as long as it is done at the right time, with the right demeanor and employing the right acts. The German Chancellor Willy Brandt, in December 1970, visited Warsaw city's memorial to the ghetto uprising of 1943 and fell on his knees before the monument in a symbolic expression of repentance for Nazi crimes against the Jews. This had a profound effect on the reconciliation between Jews and Germans and between the Poles and Germans. US President Bill Clinton apologized to the Rwandans for his country's nonchalance to the 1994 genocide at Kampala airport, alighting from an aircraft the engines of which were not turned off, an act that did not appear to the Rwandans as sincere enough. While it would be naïve to neglect the material aspects that accompany calls for national apologies, an interpretation focused solely on costs and benefits would be equally incomplete. The audience for whom the apology is intended should be convinced of its sincerity, whether compensation is offered to the victims or not.

Does apology necessarily entail grant of forgiveness? It depends on how sincere the apology is and how the people to whom it is directed interpret it. Jacques Derrida sees forgiveness to be unlinked to apology. Who should start the process first- the victim or the offender? Governments that have committed crimes have an obligation to apologize for past wrongs without expectation of forgiveness from the victims. Apology is a public act, but forgiveness, although can be equally public, is

in essence dependent on the ability to forgive, based on values like compassion and love. Refusal to acknowledge the wrong and apologise for it will be seen as impeding the reconciliation process. Despite the occasional statements by the Japanese political leaders expressing regret for the rape and genocide in Nanking and the use of Korean women as sexual slaves during the Second World War, both the Chinese and the Koreans are unconvinced about the sincerity of these acts. In contrast, the US government expressed its regret to all living Japanese-Americans forcibly interned during World War II both publicly and through individual letters to each of the victims, besides offering monetary compensation.

Pope John Paul II illustrated the role of public confession powerfully in 2002 when he apologized for some of the major institutional sins of the church. Some of the offenses for which he repented included the Crusades, the Inquisition, forced evangelism, and the persecution of Jews. This is why Pope John Paul II has claimed that forgiveness is essential in building stable, just societies. In his 2002 message on the World Day of Peace, the Pontiff said:

"Society too is absolutely in need of forgiveness. Families, groups, societies, States and the international community itself need forgiveness in order to renew ties that have been sundered, go beyond sterile situations of mutual condemnation and overcome the temptation to discriminate against others without appeal. The ability to forgive lies at the very basis of the idea of a future society marked by justice and solidarity" (John Paul II 2002).

Once guilt is acknowledged either through public apology, request of forgiveness or truth telling, the pathway to forgiveness is cleared. Although memories do not disappear altogether, some degree of consolation is offered to the victims through such apologies. The discourse on responsibility has grown enormously in recent years in international relations. It is through acknowledgement that a nation or group takes care of its responsibility for an act. Govier (2003: 85) says:

"When there is no acknowledgement of the wrong doing, the initial wound develops into the 'second wound of silence', because the lack of acknowledgement indicates that people condone the wrong and do not care about the baneful results. To receive acknowledgement that these things did happen, that they were wrong and

should not have happened, is to receive confirmation, validation, of one's dignity and status as a human being, and a moral being of equal worth".

The concept of forgiveness as a strictly interpersonal affair does not recognize the fact that many, if not most, major injuries in social life are collective ones (Amstutz 2004; Minow 1998) with many individuals responsible for them, making proper justice to address such injuries unobtainable in practice (Digeser 2001). It is this that makes public confession quite useful. Injuries are often ensconced in the minds of people as collective ones. This is particularly true of all wars, where offences are not seen as individual ones, but as transgressions against the whole society. There is also a problem with attribution of responsibility for crimes. Many people are simultaneously held accountable for wars and atrocities. The persons who have actually committed the crime, the person on whose orders they were committed, their superiors, and the system that sanctioned the offence - are all responsible. One could speak of degrees of culpability here. The persons who endorsed it, the persons who did not prevent it from happening and the persons who in their quest for their own survival did not put up any defense in favor of their friends and relatives are all morally culpable. How can justice be carried out when millions of people are at fault? In such situations it is only through collective recognition of the wrong, confession and regret that some degree of justice can be meted out to the victims. Trudy Govier says that the moral complexity of political conflicts serves as a strong argument for adopting forgiving attitudes. She claims that ethnic and group conflicts are very often so complicated, so rich with a history of atrocities and injuries on both sides, that it is hard to speak of clear victims and perpetrators, a point that has been illustrated by Mamdani (1997) in the context of Africa.

The Question of Transitional Justice

In places where the wrongs are much more recent, the question of how the victims can live alongside past perpetrators, when there is no other option available, emerges. The authority that comes to power replacing the old perpetrators of crimes has to confront the issue of how to deal with those who have committed wrongs, some of whom may continue to remain as prominent

members of society. There is always the danger that if the new authority adopts a tough posture towards the perpetrators in deference to the wishes of victims, individuals and groups loyal to the previous regime will make every attempt to undermine the new government. The question of whether the focus should be on maintaining peace or on justice (punishing the offenders) also needs to be answered. If we make peace conditional on justice, thinking that the demands of justice be met before forgiveness can set in, we are making the need for the latter redundant in one sense (Digeser 1998).

It is in the midst of these dilemmas that the restorative justice paradigm emerges as a relatively more practical and communitarian approach to justice. It gives precedence to the healing of victims and offenders and the restoration of communal relationships. Whereas the retributive model seeks to redress wrongdoing through legal accountability and punishment, the restorative approach emphasizes the healing of individuals through the discovery, disclosure and acknowledgement of truth. Like non-violence it is often viewed as a form of cheap reconciliation. It does not, however, unilaterally absolve offenders of their culpability, but makes major demands of both offenders as well as the victims. The restorative justice paradigm therefore presents an alternative paradigm for meting out a form of justice within a relational framework with which the victims, offenders and the community are able to relate.

The basis of most Western criminal justice systems, as well as the international human rights movement is a belief in the idea of retributive justice or making offenders legally accountable for their actions. This implies that the offenders need to be punished. The same logic applies to the approach adopted by the International Criminal Court in identifying and punishing those who have committed genocide and crimes against humanity (Amstutz 2004), and not allowing a social process enabling the victims to participate in the process of naming and shaming the perpetrators.

A discussion on forgiveness also leaves many questions behind. This includes the status of forgiving someone who does not request or seek it or, worse still, does not think the need for doing so due to a feeling of self-righteousness. There are also problems as to whether anyone can forgive on behalf of persons either living or dead. It may be noted that many apologies of Heads of

States are offered on behalf of people who are already dead and gone.

Forgive and Forget or Remember and Forgive

Forgiveness is often taken to mean ‘forgive and forget’. Forgiveness neither implies forgetting nor condoning what has been done. But it removes “the sting in the memory” that continues to threaten social life. Political forgiveness is not the neglect of memory, but a means by which the legacy of past wrongdoing is redeemed, thus making it possible for the healing of personal and interpersonal injuries. We need to remember wrongs in a “more mature and inclusive way”, allowing space for “some degree of empathy”, and an ability to see others as real people with needs, grievances and goals (Govier 2002: 151). Martha Minow tells us that we need to steer a “path between too much memory and too much forgetting” (1998: 4). This is possible only if we separate the deeds from the doer, the act from the person who has committed it. We, therefore, do not forgive the deeds, but persons who have committed them. All agents are capable of reflecting upon their deeds, renouncing their actions, and committing themselves to doing better in the future; all agents are, in principle, forgivable. Here, there is a problem. One of the assumptions is that the doer can be separated from the deed, the sinner from the sin. In other words, we seek to condemn the act, but preserve the person. This is also one of the dictums of non-violent action and conflict resolution of all kinds, be it in negotiations or in its deeper form known as conflict transformation. Whether we can really separate the doers from the deed remains a real problem. I think this is not always possible because the deed may sometimes be the result of the evil nature of the person rather than the system or circumstances. For many ordinary people, the question of separating the problem from the person does not appear convincing or comprehensible enough.

The Work of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission

What sort of message did Nelson Mandela sought to convey by allowing his white jailor to be an invitee at his presidential inauguration in 1994? The symbolic message of that act represented a worldview that promoted values of reconciliation rather than revenge. It set the tone

for a new pluralist South Africa, a ‘rainbow nation’. Many supporters of the African National Congress demanded Nuremberg style tribunals and absolute accountability for the decades of murder the National Party (NP) was responsible for. The NP instead wanted blanket amnesty. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was a middle ground, which both the parties eventually agreed to work with. The dictates of absolute justice in this case was seen as clearly impossible.

That there is a democratic South Africa even after more than a decade and a half of freedom is largely because the quest for absolute justice was tempered with the need to achieve reconciliation. In other words, it sought to achieve restorative justice in which there is a privileging of reconciliation over retribution. The theology or worldview of *ubuntu* employed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999) provided the basis for this restorative approach. Rashied Omar, a South African Muslim cleric and community leader, however, strongly criticised the forgiveness rhetoric of the TRC calling it a product of both political pressures and the Christian theology of Chairman Tutu (Daye 2004). South Africa now has more information about its past than it would have if the new government had decided to try all the known offenders through the courts. In spite of the fact that Africa is home to some of the deadliest civil wars and horrendous atrocities stemming from them, its people understand the language of forgiveness in personal, social and political life better than in any other region of comparable size. The fact that bitter rivals like Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai could form a transitional unity government in Zimbabwe is, in some ways, a testimony to that. The South African TRC provided a public space for truth telling, expression of remorse and granting of amnesty. These themes came to be discussed in restaurants and taverns, at dinner tables, at the office, on radio and television, in the newspapers. The net result was the beginning of a public conversation about the conflict and violence of the past, more than in any other country (Daye 2004). In some ways, it would not be incorrect to say that forgiveness emerged in South Africa after the end of apartheid when the forgiving party, predominantly the black Africans, were in a position of strength. The decision to establish the TRC was guided by a combination of African values and a certain degree of realism. Although South Africa is occasionally in the news for the

xenophobic violence, the culture of human rights is quite deep-rooted in the country, which has partly to do with the public way in which the TRC activities were carried out.

In Rwanda, a traditional method of conflict resolution known as *gacaca* was found more practical and this was along the lines of restorative justice. With over one hundred thousand accused, the criminal justice system was simply overwhelmed. Sierra Leone, which had the problem of child soldiers, took a two pronged approach- trying the key kingpins of the crimes against humanity in a UN-funded special court and leaving the large number of other perpetrators to go through a South African style TRC, which unlike the latter, had no power to grant amnesty to those who came to testify and acknowledge their guilt.

This is not to claim that the truth recovery and forgiveness project will bring straightforward results. We do not have any means to measure the impact of these Truth Commissions, particularly on the process of healing. In some ways, projects that seek to achieve reconciliation through forgiveness effect some kind of coercion on the victims by prompting them to forgive. Such projects are also often criticised for their seeming gender neutrality. We have no evidence to suggest that the victims going through truth recovery and reconciliation process have experienced empowerment of sorts or their perpetrators felt true remorse. While such processes may not be able to bring about reconciliation at the individual level, they might have some influence at the community level.

CONCLUSION

The forgiveness model is based on the assumption that although reason and strategic thinking can be a part of the process of reconciliation, it is often necessary to appeal to the faculty of heart, to emotions, in some intractable conflicts. The traditional model of "justice as fairness" is questioned, particularly its effectiveness to stop cycles of revenge and violence within a country. The more recent evolution of the "justice as reconciliation" paradigm developed by scholars like Mamdani (1997) and derived from the South African experience, is perhaps a better approach.

What then are the possibilities and limits of forgiveness? It certainly has immense potential

for societies recovering from conflicts and for those nations who would like to address historical wrongs as part of their international diplomacy. But the process has to take an evolutionary course. Unlike retributive justice, a restorative approach assumes that the pursuit of social and political reconciliation is vital in promoting a political culture that is conducive to human dignity.

The question of remembering and forgiving may be too difficult for some, particularly for those who have not experienced the atrocities themselves. Yet to say that this is not possible does not do adequate justice to the capacities of human beings. The whole project of forgiveness, apology and reparations needs to be built on the foundations of relational worldview that emphasizes human connectedness. Gandhi was particularly known for advocating forgiveness as a key element of his theory of social change based on a relational worldview. His *satyagraha* was in many ways an active form of forgiveness or "forgiveness in action" (Hunter and Rigby 2009).

In the Indian subcontinent, if the same logic had worked, it would have enabled people of both India and Pakistan to grieve some of the lingering wounds of the past and move forward on a more secure footing. The fact of partition and the trauma stemming from it continues to affect significant sections of society on both sides of the border even after six decades. The Godhra tragedy and the ensuing Gujarat carnage aided and abetted by the state are all candidates for apology and forgiveness. The 1984 riots against the Sikhs and the destruction of the Babri Masjid are also unhealed memories. No associative strategy for addressing communal conflicts can be solely built on reason and rational choice assumptions. It has to tap on the human capacity to repent, apologise, forgive and repair. There is, certainly, as Bishop Tutu (1999) titled his book with foresight, 'no future without forgiveness'.

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