



forgiveness



forgiveness and psychology

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introduction

This is the first in a series of fifteen papers to be produced over a two-year period as part of the Embodying Forgiveness project run by the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland (CCCI). Drawing on a broad range of contributors, the papers aim to explore the meaning of forgiveness in the Bible and in different Christian traditions, and to ask about the implications of the practice of forgiveness for our society. It is perhaps worth saying at the outset that we have not insisted on a particular definition or understanding of forgiveness among those who will be contributing papers to the series. Rather, our hope is that through this series of papers we will come to a fuller and more authentic understanding of forgiveness which may alternately challenge and affirm our existing convictions.

Forgiveness, of course, while often thought of in a religious context is not exclusively a religious idea. Believers and unbelievers alike can speak of, practice or refuse forgiveness. The idea of forgiveness and related themes such as memory, truth, justice, repentance and reconciliation are commonplace in our moral discourse and make their mark in our culture – whether the ‘popular’ culture of *Neighbours* or the ‘high’ culture of *King Lear* or *Crime and Punishment*.

However, until quite recently the idea of forgiveness played little part in the theoretical discussions of conflict resolution – whether at a political or personal level. For political scientists or psychologists to talk of forgiveness seemed, to say the least, a little odd. Now, however, things are changing. While forgiveness struggles to make headway in the field of political science and international relations, there has been a new appreciation and embrace of the idea among psychologists dealing with conflict.

The purpose of this first paper in the series is to summarise briefly, and assess from a Christian perspective, the new appreciation of the idea of forgiveness in contemporary psychology.

psychology and inter-personal forgiveness

Forgiveness is a relatively new concept within psychology, with little attention paid to it until quite recently. One possible reason for this indifference or hostility to the concept is that, traditionally, the idea of

forgiveness has been seen as a religious one. Given the aversion to anything religious that is common within the social sciences it is not surprising that psychology has largely ignored forgiveness.

However, more recently some psychologists have come to view forgiveness as a psychological health intervention, realising that there is a link between forgiveness and the emotional state of an individual. Kathleen Lawler, a psychologist from the University of Tennessee, has recently demonstrated that forgiveness is not only beneficial to mental health but also to physical health. Lawler's research showed that those who forgave had lower blood pressure and lower levels of anxiety than those who did not forgive. Psychologists want to know how and why the practice of forgiveness has these effects. By isolating what is happening when people are practicing forgiving, psychologists aim to develop psychological methods and practices that can help people to forgive and so improve their mental and physical well-being.

The growth of interest in forgiveness among psychologists can be traced from 1932 when J Piaget and S Behn produced works addressing the subject. Until 1980, however, there was little coherent work on the theme. Instead, there were occasional theoretical papers by a handful of researchers. "The attention paid to forgiveness in the years 1932-1980 was piecemeal. Researchers did not begin to devote serious, sustained energy to the concept of forgiveness until the last 20 years of the 20th century."¹

This serious engagement with the theme has generated a huge amount of research investigating areas such as forgiveness and moral development, forgiveness within counselling and clinical psychology, and forgiveness in personality and social psychology. Of the many researchers involved in this work one of the most influential has been Robert Enright of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who is president of the *International Forgiveness Institute*.² Richard Fitzgibbons, a practicing psychiatrist in Philadelphia, has argued that "the research on forgiveness by Robert Enright and his colleagues may be as important to the treatment of emotional and mental disorders as the discovery of sulfa drugs and penicillin have been to the treatment of infectious diseases."³

One of the aims of Enright and his colleagues has been to devise a

model for the forgiveness process that can help people to forgive. The model that they have devised traces the unfolding process of forgiveness through four phases, though the model is not intended to be rigid but “a flexible set of processes.”⁴

First there is the ‘Uncovering Phase’. In this phase the injured person examines the psychological defences that he may have used as a protection from any further pain. In doing this he becomes aware, perhaps for the first time, of the extent of the hurt he has suffered. This awareness of hurt is associated with negative emotions such as anger and resentment. Emotionally, this may be a very disturbing time, as the person confronts and comes to terms with his pain. As all of these emotions are brought to the surface the process of forgiveness has begun.

The second phase is a continuation of this first phase in that the emotions that have already been faced may lead to the injured person having to confront his feelings of anger. This confrontation is carried out in the ‘Decision Phase’. It is during this stage that he must realise that continuing to focus on the hurt, and the person who caused the hurt, could result in unnecessary suffering. He must realise that a change needs to take place within himself if there is to be any prospect of complete healing and forgiveness. At this point he may begin to consider seriously forgiveness as a way forward. He may experience a change of heart, and begin to direct his life in a more positive way. A commitment is then made to forgive. However, this does not mean that real forgiveness has taken place; it simply means that the decision has been made to investigate forgiveness further. At this point feelings of revenge must be put aside.

It is during the next phase that the serious work of forgiveness begins. This ‘Work Phase’ will see the offender being viewed differently, with feelings of compassion and empathy. The injured person may begin to put the injurious event into context by seeing it through the eyes of the offender. In doing this he may try to understand some of the pressures that the offender might have been under at the time. This is not done so that the offender can be excused, but in order that there be a better understanding of the offender’s actions. Also at this point the injured person accepts the pain and hurt that he has suffered. This is not, however, an acceptance that this hurt was deserved, but is, rather, an

acceptance that he has had to bear a pain that has been unjustly inflicted. Now the injured person is faced with a difficult challenge: bearing the pain unjustly inflicted, he must not inflict this pain on others, including the offender who has caused it. The injured person must now become ready to extend some form of goodwill towards the offender, taking into account any issues of safety and trust that there may be between them. However, it is entirely up to the injured person whether this goodwill should lead to some form of reconciliation.

The final phase in this model of forgiveness is the 'Deepening Phase'. This is where the person will gradually begin to realise that he is gaining emotional relief as he works through the process. He may also find some kind of meaning for himself or for others in the suffering that he has faced. He realises that he himself has not been without the need of forgiveness from others in the past, and through this realisation he discovers that he is not alone.

At the end of this phase, and therefore of the whole forgiveness process, an injured individual has achieved a great deal. He has given up on feelings of anger and resentment, replacing them instead with feelings of mercy and goodwill. He has started to view the offender with compassion and empathy, not with hatred. Most importantly, he has received emotional relief and peace of mind, and gained a more positive approach to life by finding some degree of meaning to the experience of pain and hurt.⁵

This model has shaped thinking about forgiveness within psychology and, even where a different model is followed, the same broad themes tend to be present. Psychologists aim to get unforgiving people to examine, in some detail, the hurt that they have received, and to investigate, perhaps for the first time, how deeply this hurt has affected them. In doing so they are expected to waive any right they may have to revenge, for, without doing this, forgiveness - complete forgiveness - is not possible. The unforgiving person needs to come to see the offender as a human being and to empathise with the offender - not excusing or condoning, but understanding the person. Once all of this has been achieved forgiveness can be extended.

psychology and corporate forgiveness

Enright's model addresses the issue of interpersonal forgiveness, that is, how individuals forgive other individuals who have hurt them in some way. But how do psychologists view the issue of forgiveness between communities and groups that are locked in conflict?

In 1944 Simon Wiesenthal stood by helplessly as he saw his grandmother killed and his mother bundled away in a freight car. In the months that followed eighty-nine of Wiesenthal's relatives were killed by the Nazis. After his own capture, Wiesenthal was working in a prison camp when he was approached by a German nurse who asked if he was a Jew. When Wiesenthal affirmed that he was, she took him to the hospital for German casualties and led him into a room where a soldier lay wrapped in bandages. The injured man was an SS officer, Karl. Karl wanted to confess what he had done to the Jews and, having confessed, wanted forgiveness from a Jew. Karl and his SS unit had rounded up three hundred Jews, sealed them in a large house, doused the building with petrol and fired grenades at it. Karl and his officers shot anyone who tried to escape from the burning house. Karl said to Wiesenthal, "In the last hours of my life you are with me. I do not know who you are, I know only that you are a Jew and that is enough...In the long nights waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him..."⁶ Wiesenthal left the room without saying a word, and Karl died without having received the forgiveness of a Jew.

How could Wiesenthal forgive this SS officer on behalf of his fellow Jews? The challenge of forgiveness between corporate entities, or forgiveness on behalf of those entities, is even greater than the already challenging question of interpersonal forgiveness. The hurts and wounds that divide communities often stretch back into a vaguely recalled history and give rise to anger directed, not just towards particular individuals, but to whole groups of people.

Given the depth of the hurt that often exists and the hostility that there often is towards other communities, is it possible as a member of one community to extend or to ask for forgiveness on behalf of that community if we ourselves have not directly hurt or been hurt? How can we make sense of the idea of forgiveness if there is no one individual to take responsibility and where those who are directly

responsible for inflicting injury are long gone? How is it possible to forgive someone other than the person who hurt you, to forgive someone on behalf of a loved one, a neighbour or an ancestor? Can the grandchild of a murdered Jew forgive the grandchild of a Nazi? It is not obvious that Enright's process can work in this context.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, some psychologists do believe that forgiveness is possible in situations like this. This phenomenon they describe as 'secondary forgiveness'. "As people who indirectly experience the wounds, maybe we can indirectly forgive."⁷ Since the hurts within communities transcend generations, the living members of that community have inherited the wounds of their ancestors. Because of this, it is argued, it is possible then to ask for and to extend forgiveness on behalf of those who have gone before. The key, if secondary forgiveness is to work, is 'empathy'. Enemies locked in conflict need to understand the pain that they have caused each other, and in doing this they may realise that, "their differences are not as important as their shared experiences of suffering."⁸

This sense of empathy can bring about two things: a sense of 'regret', and a desire for some form of 'restitution'. Psychologist Martin Golding has suggested three different kinds of regret: intellectual, moral and other-oriented. 'Intellectual regret' is a very artificial form of regret in that we only regret what has happened because it has gone wrong. Is a prisoner, jailed for planting a bomb that killed numerous people, regretful of what he has done out of a moral feeling of what is right and wrong or because he has been caught? 'Moral regret', on the other hand, is where there is a recognition that what has been done is morally wrong and needs forgiveness. Finally, 'other-oriented regret' recognises that our own actions have caused considerable pain to other individuals, hurting not just a group but people with individual identities.⁹ If the groups in conflict are to express this regret fully, then they must offer some form of restitution, be it financial help or the introduction of assistance for reconstruction.

Duane Elmer has suggested that some such process was at work in Liberia following a sustained period of inter-communal violence. At a conference attended by representatives of the various factions, those present were encouraged to tell others of the greatest trauma they had experienced during the conflict. As they told of their own

experiences and listened to those of others they developed empathy for each other. *“They realised that their differences were not as important as their shared experiences of suffering. Empathy...gave participants the insight that their enemies were humans and that those enemies suffered the same kinds of grief and loss they suffered themselves.”*¹⁰

That some measure of dealing with the past in communities in conflict is needed seems certain. Even if conflict can be ended, if the causes of the conflict are left unresolved and the hurts left buried, it is always possible that the past will arise to devour the present and the future.¹¹

forgiveness in psychology - some christian reflections

A number of psychologists who have worked in this area and are themselves believing Christians have written a more accessible book on forgiveness drawing on psychological research.¹² This book, published by the mainstream Christian publishing house IVP in the United States, does not translate these findings into a Christian framework. Instead, the authors eschew “excessive reliance on explicitly Christian language and on theological constructs,” but they also assert that “psychological research on forgiveness is easily harmonised with traditional Christian theology.”¹³

One influential Christian theologian who sees continuity between psychological and Christian perspectives on forgiveness is Lewis Smedes.¹⁴ Smedes suggests that “human forgiveness has been seen as a religious obligation of love that we owe the person who has offended us. The discovery that I made was the important benefit that forgiveness is to the forgiver.”¹⁵ It is this emphasis on the therapeutic value of forgiveness for the person forgiving that connects Smedes’ work to the findings of psychologists. While Smedes, as a Christian theologian, would not want to limit forgiveness to the merely therapeutic, he does see the value and importance of this as an aspect of forgiveness and is, therefore, sympathetic to the work of psychologists in the area.

Given the increasing adoption of secular or mainstream therapeutic practices in the church it is hardly surprising that a major Christian publishing house will publish a work on forgiveness from a

psychological perspective, nor that some theologians have seen points of contact between psychological and Christian perspectives. However, other theologians, while welcoming the renewed interest in and exploration of the concept, are less confident that psychological research on forgiveness can be “easily harmonised” with Christian belief or practice.

The most thorough and detailed analysis is that of Greg Jones in his book *Embodying Forgiveness*.¹⁶ Jones suggests that “there is an abiding importance for psychological explorations and practices in our world, and particularly in Christian life. However,” he continues, “Christians have allowed therapies – and more generally a therapeutic mindset – to overtake Christian claims and Christian practices. As a result,” he concludes, “Christians have failed to appropriate psychological insights critically, all too often adopting distorting and reductionistic practices and beliefs that trivialize those central Christian claims and practices.” (36)

Jones identifies a number of problems with the idea of forgiveness in modern culture. In the first place, he argues, the emphasis on individual autonomy and the importance of technique have undermined forgiveness, since the primary focus of true forgiveness is on community rather than the individual, and on character rather than technique. Second, the Christian churches have contributed to this process through their own failure to embody a way of forgiveness true to the biblical model. Forgiveness has become a private matter focused largely through an internalised piety. Consequently, while maintaining the rhetoric of forgiveness, church practice has subverted the reality. But more than this, Christians have increasingly secularised the language of forgiveness, using non-theological language to communicate theological truth. At worst, Christians have substituted therapeutic language for Christian language. As an illustration of the practical consequences of this Jones recounts a story:

Psychiatrist Robert Coles tells of a friend, a devout Roman Catholic, who was hospitalised with cancer. On one of Coles's visits to the hospital, he found his friend quite angry. A priest had recently been to visit and wanted to know how the patient was managing to 'cope.' The priest proceeded in what Coles calls a “relentless kind of

psychological inquiry.” How was the patient ‘feeling’? How was he ‘managing,’ in view of the ‘stress’ he had to ‘confront’? The friend was enraged by such questions; he wanted to talk with the priest about God and God’s ways, about Christ’s life and death, about Luke’s gospel (a particular favourite), about Heaven and Hell – only to be approached repeatedly with words and phrases drawn from the vocabulary of popular psychology. As the friend characterized it to Coles: “He comes here with a Roman collar and offers me psychological banalities as God’s word!”

The friend commented that he was prepared for the priest’s next visit. Among other things, he was going to ask the priest to read Psalm 69. Coles cites one part of that psalm: “Save me, O God; for the waters are come into my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deprivation, where the floods overflow me.” Coles concludes by commenting: “There are, of course, many kinds of burdens in this life. I wonder whether the deepest mire, the deepest waters, for many of America’s clergy, not to mention us laymen, may be found in the dreary solipsistic world so many of us have learned to find so interesting: the mind’s moods, the various ‘stages’ and ‘phases’ of ‘human development’ or ‘dying,’ all dwelt upon (God save us!) as if *Stations of the Cross*.” (35-36)

Jones’ aim in his analysis is not to dismiss the importance of psychology or counselling. It is rather to suggest that the triumph of the therapeutic culture has affected the church as much as the rest of society with devastating consequences for the church’s ability to express and enact its understanding of forgiveness. In place of this captivity to psychological language and practice, Jones insists on the need for a return to the language and practice of the gospel. Fundamental to that language and practice is eschatology.

“We need to resituate our conceptions of the self, of sin and forgiveness, and of the call to holiness, in their larger context of God’s inbreaking Kingdom.” (64) The failure to do this has resulted in a community which has been unable to embody Christian forgiveness and has, as a result, aided the triumph of the therapeutic in the church. Only as Christians learn to see the eschatological dimensions of forgiveness will we find the means to embody forgiveness in life and practice. “Christian forgiveness...is a way of life, a fidelity to a

relationship of friendship, that must be learned and relearned on our journey toward holiness in God's eschatological Kingdom." (66)

conclusion

The discovery by psychology of the significance of forgiveness is to be welcomed. However, given the dominance of secular modes of therapeutic practice within the church, Christian engagement with the psychology of forgiveness needs to be tempered with a strong insistence on the distinctive aspects of Christian forgiveness. If the renewed emphasis on forgiveness stands as a challenge to churches to learn how they might embody the practice of Christian forgiveness, then it will have served the church well. If, however, Christians uncritically adopt practical models drawn from psychological research then we will simply perpetuate and reinforce the triumph of the therapeutic in the church.

notes

1 Michael McCullough, Kenneth Pargament and Carl Thoresen, "The Psychology of Forgiveness: History, Conceptual Issues, and Overview" pp 1-14 in McCullough, Pargament & Thoresen (eds), *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, Practice* (Guilford Press: New York 2000) pp 5-6.

2 See www.forgivenessinstitute.org

3 Richard Fitzgibbons, "Anger and the Healing Power of Forgiveness: A Psychiatrists View" pp 63-74 in Robert D Enright and Joanna North (eds) *Exploring Forgiveness* (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison 1998) p 71.

4 Robert Enright, Suzanne Freedman and Julio Rique, "The Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness" pp 46-62 in Enright and North *Exploring Forgiveness* p 52.

5 Enright, Freedman and Rique, pp 52-55.

6 Cited in Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids 1997) p 110.

7 Michael McCullough, Steven Sandage and Everett Worthington, *To Forgive is Human: How to Put Your Past in the Past* (IVP: Downers Grove 1997) p 222.

8 McCullough, Sandage and Worthington *To Forgive is Human* p 222.

9 McCullough, Sandage and Worthington *To Forgive is Human* p 224.

10 McCullough, Sandage and Worthington *To Forgive is Human* p 223 (Emphasis in original).

11 See Yancey, *What's So Amazing* p 120.

12 McCullough, Sandage and Worthington, *To Forgive is Human*.

13 McCullough, Sandage and Worthington, *To Forgive is Human* p 13.

14 See, for example, Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts we Don't Deserve* (Harper Collins: New York 1984).

15 In Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor" pp 38-45 *Christianity Today* January 10 2000 p 42.

16 L Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 1995). Further references to this book will be given parenthetically in the text.

recomended reading

introductory article:

Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor" pp 38-45 *Christianity Today* January 10 2000

psychological perspectives:

Robert D Enright and Joanna North (eds) *Exploring Forgiveness* (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison 1998)

theological perspectives:

L Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*
(Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 1995)

websites:

www.forgiving.org

www.forgivenessday.org

www.forgivenessweb.org

www.forgivenessinstitute.org

website.lineone.net/~andrewhdknock/index.html

forthcoming forgiveness papers:

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Forgiveness, Guilt, and Repentance

Forgiveness, Truth and Memory

Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Justice

Forgiveness - Individual or Collective

Forgiveness and the Individual

Forgiveness and the Church

Forgiveness and Social Groups

Forgiveness and Politics

Forgiveness in Literature and Popular Culture

Concluding Reflections

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