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Talking politics, talking forgiveness

L. Philip Barnes
Centre for Theology, Religion and Culture, King's College London SE1 9NH, UK
philip.barnes@kcl.ac.uk

Abstract

The aim of this article is to provide a provisional review and evaluation of recent Christian endorsements of the notion of political forgiveness. Attention is given to the doctrine of forgiveness in the New Testament and to its distinctive theological grammar. The chief theological features of Christian accounts of political forgiveness are outlined, before a number of weaknesses in the literature are identified and discussed. The implication of our discussion is that Christian love is expressed in two different ways, that of forgiveness upon repentance within the church and that of justice tempered by mercy in the socio-political realm.

The terms 'forgiveness' and 'reconciliation' are enjoying wider linguistic currency. On 28 March 2008, for example, the BBC Radio 4 Friday Play, entitled *Forgiveness*, explored the fictional account of a family trying to find reconciliation after an appalling act of cruelty and violence, but interwoven through it were the voices of real victims who were struggling to move beyond bitterness and anger to embrace forgiveness. One of the voices was that of Revd Julie Nicholson, who stepped down as priest-in-charge of St Aidan's church in Bristol because she 'cannot forgive' the killers of her daughter, Jenny, who died in the Islamist terrorist bombings of 7 July in London. 'It is very difficult for me', she said, 'to stand behind an altar and celebrate the Eucharist, the Communion, and lead people in words of peace and reconciliation and forgiveness when I feel very far from that myself.'[1] Elsewhere religious ideas are increasingly put to secular use, as attempts are made 'to reconcile' criminals to their victims in schemes of restorative justice and to move divided communities beyond traditional hostilities and conflict. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up under the provisions of the 1995 National Unity and Reconciliation Act to deal with human rights' abuses which took place between 1960 and 1994 under apartheid, has done much to commend the rhetoric of political forgiveness.[2]

[1] Reported in the *Guardian*, 7 March 2006.
[2] See Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

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There is debate among Christian theologians, however, whether to embrace and endorse the emerging notion of political forgiveness or to resist its use. There are those who believe that the church's message will necessarily be compromised by attempts to give it political form. The sociologist David Martin has noted that the Christian church deals in absolutes, and absolutes do not easily translate into social and political policies.[3] There are others who question whether the notion of 'political forgiveness' is the best term and concept to describe the role of the church in divided societies; and if the term political forgiveness is concluded to be inappropriate and inherently ambiguous, how may we speak of the church's role and responsibility in ministering to and in post-conflict situations? Contemporary theologians are increasingly, however, of the opinion that Christian forgiveness has an application to the social and political realms, and even to the international realm of relations between nations.[4] Forgiveness, Donald Shriver affirms, has a role in the public square;[5] to his voice we can add the voices of John de Gruchy,[6] Alan Torrance,[7] Miraslov Volf,[8] Nicholas Wolterstorff[9] and others.[10] These writers may not agree on the detail, but the general view seems to be that the Christian concept of forgiveness has an (as yet not fully realised) application to politics, social ethics and group relations. God forgives unconditionally; we as Christians are required to emulate his character and forgive others unconditionally, and this in turn includes forgiving our

[3] David Martin, 'The Christian, the Political and the Academic', *Sociology of Religion* 55 (2004), pp. 341–56.

[4] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forgiveness in International Politics* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2004).

[5] Donald W. Shriver Jr., *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 33–62.

[6] John de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002).

[7] Alan Torrance, 'Forgiveness: The Essential Socio-Political Structure of Personal Being', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 56 (1986), pp. 47–59; and 'On Whether Forgiveness has Boundaries', in W. F. Storrar and A. R. Morton (eds), *Public Theology for the 21st Century: Essays in Honour of Duncan B. Forrester* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), pp. 303–13.

[8] Miroslov Volf, 'Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Justice: A Theological Contribution to a More Peaceable Social Environment', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29 (2000), pp. 861–77.

[9] Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'The Place of Forgiveness in the Actions of the State', in D. Philpott (ed.), *The Politics of Past Evil: Religion, Reconciliation and the Dilemmas of Transitional Justice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2006), pp. 87–111.

[10] The contributors to such symposia as R. G. Helmick and R. L. Petersen (eds), *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation* (Philadelphia, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001).

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enemies.[11] This entails that in conflict or post-conflict situations, where the enemy is traditionally identified with the 'other' community, it too must be forgiven. The enemy must be embraced in public affirmations and demonstrations of Christian forgiveness.[12] Presumably, in different political and social contexts, public affirmations and demonstrations of Christian forgiveness will take different forms.

My aim in this article is to analyse the emerging notion of political forgiveness as employed and interpreted by theologians and to raise some theological and moral concerns about Christian endorsements of it. The discussion will fall into three parts: the first is largely exegetical, as the New Testament understanding of forgiveness (and to a lesser extent reconciliation) is briefly expounded and interpreted; the second draws out and explores the theological and philosophical grammar of the Christian doctrine of forgiveness; and finally, some of the difficulties of applying the doctrine of Christian forgiveness to relations between groups and to the social and political realms are considered.

Forgiveness in the New Testament

The chief New Testament word for forgiveness is *aphesis*, meaning 'the release, pardon or cancellation of a debt'; the verbal form is *aphiemi*, meaning 'to let go, cancel or remit'.[13] References to both the noun and the verb, although common in the Synoptic Gospels (e.g. Matt 6:12; 12:32; 18:27; Mark 2:9; Luke 7:47; 11:4), are absent from large tracts of the New Testament, as for example in many of the Pauline letters and in the Gospel of John (mentioned only in John 20:23). But the paucity of references in some New Testament documents does not necessarily indicate a lack of theological significance, as the first of only two references (to the noun) in the Epistle to the Hebrews shows, where it is affirmed that 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins' (Heb 9:22). Both terms in Greek had a secular, non-religious use and this is reflected in the case of *aphiemi* in the New Testament (see Matt 18:27, for example) but not in the case of the noun, *aphesis*, which has an exclusively theological use and meaning.

[11] The argument is usually of the form that God loves unconditionally, the quality of unconditional forgiveness is an aspect of God's love, therefore we should forgive unconditionally; see John Hughes, 'The Politics of Forgiveness: A Theological Exploration of King Lear', *Modern Theology* 17 (2001), pp. 261–87, who states that 'forgiveness *is* Christian charity', p. 271 (his emphasis).

[12] Miroslov Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 99–165.

[13] In the LXX *aphiemis* and *aphiemi* are used to translate a range of Hebrew words; see R. Bultmann, '*Aphiemi*', in Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 510.

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Some scholars contend that the vocabulary of forgiveness was not employed in the earliest period of the Christian church[14] and this accounts for the lack of references to forgiveness in the so-called 'authentic' Pauline epistles (thus discounting Col 1:14 and Eph 1:7 as genuinely Pauline). Such a contention, however, is probably too speculative, for it overlooks the fact that our evidence for the beliefs and vocabulary of the early church is fragmentary, incomplete and largely confined to the documents of the New Testament: the language of forgiveness may have been popular in non-Pauline, Jewish Christian communities, for which we have no documentary evidence. In any case, although the vocabulary of forgiveness is largely absent from Paul, the ideas expressed by forgiveness and its cognates are not absent.

A number of commentators have pointed out that, for Paul, the vocabulary of justification/righteousness by faith and that of reconciliation broadly serves the same theological purpose as the language of forgiveness.[15] In Romans chapter 4, Paul refers to forgiveness when quoting from Psalm 32, in the context of his exposition of the righteousness that comes by faith and not by works:

> Blessed are those whose iniquities are *forgiven*,
> and *whose sins are covered*;
> blessed is the man against whom the Lord will *not reckon* [impute] *his sin*.

This form of parallelism is a feature of Hebrew prose and poetry; it is a common rhetorical device in the Christian Old Testament, particularly in the Psalms, to link one expression (and set of ideas) with another. Paul uses it in this context to equate forgiveness with 'righteousness without works' (Rom 4:6), that is, the righteousness which comes by faith. The person against whom his or her sin is not reckoned is in Pauline terminology *righteous*, that is, literally, 'in the right'. The sinner, although guilty before God and justly deserving punishment is, instead, by virtue of faith in Christ, declared by God to be righteous – forgiven – as offences are 'passed-over' (Rom 3:25). In the next chapter, Romans 5, Paul makes a connection between righteousness/justification and reconciliation: 'Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were sinners we were reconciled to God by the death of his son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life' (Rom 5:9–10). Both terms are used by Paul to highlight

[14] H. Vorländer, 'Forgiveness', in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), p. 701.

[15] E.g. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 1, p. 512; Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 56.

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different aspects of his (broader) doctrine of salvation. Reconciliation is a metaphor of personal relationships: two parties who are estranged are reconciled to each other – although Paul's use is typically theological, in 1 Corinthians 7:11, he implores a separated wife to 'be reconciled to her husband'. Justification, by contrast, is a forensic metaphor, used by Paul to underline the fact that God's anticipated final eschatological judgement over the individual is pronounced in the present, as the sinner is acquitted, by virtue of faith in Christ's death for sin. Paul's comment in Romans 5:10 that 'while we were sinners we were reconciled to God by the death of his son' may give the impression that reconciliation is one-sided (or unilateral) and something entirely external to ourselves – we are simply reconciled to God with no change of direction or character on our part – but other passages make it clear that for him reconciliation involves a change on the part of the sinner. At the beginning of chapter 5 he has already affirmed that peace with God is conditional on faith and in 2 Corinthians 5:20 he calls upon 'individuals to be reconciled to God'. Indeed, if reconciliation in Paul were solely a one-sided affair it would undermine the natural use of the term as a metaphor of *interpersonal relationships*. In reconciliation two parties are reconciled to each other; there is no reconciliation when one party remains estranged. Wolfhart Pannenberg captures the relational quality of reconciliation when he speaks of its 'reciprocity': 'the offer of reconciliation made by the one side must be accepted by the other if there is to be reconciliation'.[16] Moreover, reconciliation between God and humankind involves 'a change in man himself':[17] the sinner changes direction and attitude.

This reference to the fact that reconciliation involves 'a change' on the part of the offender directs us back to the issue of forgiveness, for a number of passages in the Christian scriptures forgiveness is linked to repentance. Isaiah 55:7 is typical of this viewpoint: 'Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon [forgive]'. In the New Testament it is affirmed that Jesus began his ministry with a call to 'repent and believe the good news' (Mark 1:15). After his resurrection, in an encounter with his disciples, Jesus told them to preach to all nations about 'repentance and forgiveness of sins' (Luke 24:47). On the Day of Pentecost, Peter told his listeners to '[r]epent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for (*eis*)[18] the forgiveness of your sins' (Acts 2:38). This passage

[16] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), p. 428.
[17] T. W. Manson, *On Paul and John* (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 52.
[18] Forgiveness is the gaol and consequence of repentance; see Albrecht Oepke, '*Eis*', in Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 2, pp. 420–34, particularly

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affirms that forgiveness is conditional on repentance, and is in keeping with the teaching of Jesus as presented by Luke in his Gospel:

> if your brother sins rebuke him, and if he *repents*, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says 'I repent,' you must forgive him. (Luke 17:3–4)

The grammar of Christian forgiveness

In the New Testament the context of Christian forgiveness is that of personal relationships and the language is that of reconciliation and estrangement. Forgiveness is relevant to a situation where two parties are estranged from each other, typically one who is offended and the other who is the offender. The language of forgiveness presupposes that a wrong has been done. If no wrong has been committed there is no need for forgiveness; and if the offender does not admit that a wrong has been done (unlike the person offended) then there is no possibility of either repentance or forgiveness; though of course for the Christian who has been offended there is the obligation to love the offender. There can be no reconciliation in the biblical sense when one party refuses to acknowledge wrong and admit responsibility (and where there is no confession of guilt there can be no forgiveness, only the call to forgiveness). For reconciliation to occur the offender must be prepared to admit his or her fault (that is, an admission of wrong) and apologise, for, as C.F.D. Moule notes, 'it is only by repentance . . . that forgiveness can be received'.[19] In response, the offended party forgives and the former relationship between them is resumed. An offence destroys a relationship and forgiveness restores it.

What precisely does forgiveness mean? There seems little point in Christians extolling the virtue of forgiveness and its application to the social and political realms of existence if by their usage and application they betray its religious meaning. As John de Gruchy has affirmed, '[t]he relevance of the Christian doctrine of reconciliation is contingent on it retaining its distinct theological meaning'.[20] Theologically, forgiveness means that your sin is not reckoned to you and you are not held accountable to God for your wrongs. Positively, you are treated as if you had not committed any wrong. In other words, before God you are in the right and treated as such. Forgiveness is 'the wiping out of an offence . . . by the one affronted,

p. 429, and M. J. Harris, 'Eis', in Colin Brown (ed.), *New International Dictionary of NT Theology*, vol. 3, pp. 1184–99, and pp. 1208–9.

[19] C. F. D. Moule, 'The Christian Understanding of Forgiveness', *Theology* 71 (1968), pp. 435–43, 442.

[20] De Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, p. 46.

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along with the restoration of harmony'.[21] Although one may distinguish two aspects of forgiveness, that of the wiping out of the offence and that of the restoration to fellowship, their unity must be maintained. Some theologians incorrectly equate forgiveness with the first movement only; and then speak of reconciliation supplementing forgiveness.[22] This is unsatisfactory for if one is forgiven by God then what further barrier remains to reconciliation? The sinner forgiven is the sinner reconciled. The wiping out of the offence means that the sinner is released from sin and by virtue of being released from sin, the sinner is reconciled to God. To be released from sin is to be reconciled to God, for when sin is removed no further barrier to fellowship remains. If sin separates from God, and sin covers acts of omission as well as acts of commission (and hence forgiveness is consequently sought for those things that we ought to have done and those things that we ought not to have done), then forgiveness, if it cancels sin, necessarily establishes a new relationship with God, for there is no barrier remaining between God and the individual. Equally, there is no release from the spiritual consequences of sin where there is no reconciliation with God. Forgiveness, upon repentance, initiates a new relationship with God or the restoration of a relationship which has been broken. God loves everyone, the love of the Father is unconditional, but forgiveness from the Father and reconciliation with him is conditional on repentance by the sinner.

The theological nature of forgiveness is underlined by the fact that the majority of references to forgiveness and its cognates in the New Testament are concerned with divine forgiveness and presuppose the need for divine forgiveness. It is this which brings forgiveness into proximity with the notion of sin and the biblical idea that 'sins' alienate from God: by sinning the individual acts unrighteously, transgresses from God's way and falls short of God's standard. Sin is a theological category but its application extends beyond those acts which are specifically directed against God to embrace the wrongs which human beings both inflict upon each other and upon nature. Individuals sin against each other and become alienated from each other as a result; thus there is a need for forgiveness in human relationships as well as in divine–human relationships. Although the thrust of the New Testament is for sinners to seek forgiveness from God, it also speaks of the need for human forgiveness of those whom we trespass against and those who 'trespass against us'. The realm of true religion embraces human relationships with each other as well as the relationship between the individual and God.

[21] Gary S. Shogren, 'Forgiveness (NT)', in N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 835.

[22] E.g. Brian Lennon, 'Review Article: An Ethic for Enemies', *Studies* 85 (1996), pp. 381–7.

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The theological pattern of divine forgiveness upon repentance is equally applicable to the pattern of forgiveness in the case of broken interpersonal relationships. God's love for us, and his embrace of us upon repentance, provides the model for our relationships with others. God commands us to do what he exemplifies, namely, to love unconditionally and to forgive upon repentance. God's moral character does not command us to do what he cannot do, that is, to forgive and restore to fellowship without repentance. God is not reconciled to an offender who does not accept that an offence has been committed (against God) and who chooses not to be reconciled.

In practical terms, Christian forgiveness means that the offender is treated as if he or she had not committed the offence (in so far as guilt is concerned).[23] Forgiveness in Christian vocabulary is essentially a performative utterance: forgiveness is *shown*, as the offender is treated as if no offence had originally been committed and no hurt originally inflicted. Upon repentance, God forgives and accepts the individual into fellowship. In human relationships, two (or more) people are reconciled to each other, one who repents and one who forgives, or perhaps both repent, if both are culpable, and both forgive.

But why should someone who repents be forgiven? The repentant person should be forgiven because she is no longer the same person – she has changed. She is different. Her beliefs and attitudes have changed with regard to the words and actions which originally inflicted the hurt or harm. She no longer believes it was right to act in the way she did (that is, if she believed herself to be in the right in the first place), or she acknowledges that there was insufficient justification for her acting in the way she did, or more simply that she did wrong and now regrets it. One aspect of a distinctively Christian contribution to the notion of forgiveness is that, upon repentance, forgiveness must be granted even though strictly speaking forgiveness is not a *moral* duty. The act of forgiveness goes beyond what morality and justice require. Forgiveness (upon repentance) is a gift, as the derivation of the word indicates (the Anglo-Saxon root is *for-*, 'away', and *giefan*, 'to give', hence 'to give away', corresponding to the Greek *aphesis*). In this sense, the Christian understanding of forgiveness can be contrasted with some secular accounts of morality, which either do not require forgiveness or encourage forgiveness as a means to self-fulfilment and inner peace. Forgiving acts are often described by moral philosophers as acts of supererogation, acts that lie above and

[23] The qualification about guilt allows forgiveness for those who, for different reasons, can be expected to commit the same offence again and so strictly speaking cannot be treated as if they had never done wrong. The qualification also allows for taking account of the consequences of wrongdoing or the exercise of discipline.

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beyond the call of duty. 'Such acts', Jonathan Dancy tells us, 'characteristically enjoy a high degree of value, probably more value than any other act available to the agent. But in thinking of them as supererogatory, we are thinking of them as actions which it is not wrong of the agent not to do.'[24] There is no moral duty incumbent upon the victim to forgive. By contrast there is a religious duty for the Christian to forgive upon repentance. Forgiveness upon repentance is a gift of mercy, not a duty of morality. Forgiveness is virtuous because one's proper anger is relinquished while acknowledging the reality of the offence and the moral culpability of the offender.[25] Unlike condoning offences, forgiveness does not compromise the moral law or the moral integrity of the person offended. If one forgives the offender without her admission of guilt and wrongdoing one undermines the legitimacy of the moral imperative: you are treated as having fulfilled the requirements of morality even though you have not and have not admitted that the moral law is either binding on you or that it has been broken by you. Forgiveness without repentance undermines both morality and respect for persons. It is the conditional nature of forgiveness which helps to confirm the objectivity and reality of the moral law of God. At the heart of the Christian view of atonement is the view that God is right to forgive sin because he has met the requirements of the moral law in the death of Christ (see Rom 3:21–6): sin has been condemned, justice upheld and on this basis God's love issues in forgiveness to those who repent.[26] God's forgiveness upon repentance provides the model for human forgiveness. Equally, the Christian injunction to 'love your enemies' requires that repentance on the part of the offender be met by forgiveness on the part of the victim. The meaning and practice of Christian love requires Christians to put away natural feelings of bitterness and resentment and be prepared to forgive those who have wronged them.

Political forgiveness: a critique

Although there are increasing theological endorsements of political forgiveness, to which we have already referred, there are a number of weaknesses in the literature. The first is that too many Christian accounts of political forgiveness are theologically underdeveloped: they either fail to engage at any depth with the relevant biblical and doctrinal material or

[24] Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), p. 127.

[25] A reading of David Konstan's study of the concept of pity in ancient Greece and Rome reveals the extent to which it and the related concept of forgiveness assumed prominence in the West only with the coming of Christianity; see David Konstan, *Pity Transformed* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2001), pp. 105–24.

[26] Peter Jenson, 'Forgiveness and Atonement', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993), pp. 141–59.

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they engage at depth with only a proportion of the relevant material. The result is that accounts of political forgiveness are not fully grounded in theological convictions and therefore not fully expressive and illustrative of the Christian pattern of belief and practice over against other patterns of belief and practice, say that of secular humanism or of alternative religious patterns such as Islam or Judaism, for example. Most frequently, Christian affirmations of political forgiveness are unrelated to the doctrine of the atonement and any consideration of the relationship between the death of Christ and the forgiveness of sins, even though such a link is central to the witness of the New Testament. Alan Torrance, for example, who does give attention to the theology of forgiveness in his endorsement of political forgiveness,[27] almost totally omits reference to the atonement. His discussion centres on the relationship between law and grace and on the notion of Christ's 'vicarious humanity' – the theme of Christ's vicarious sacrifice for sin is not discussed (and it is the latter which traditionally is discussed in relation to forgiveness).

The second weakness is that many of the policies and practices recommended by theologians who speak of political forgiveness seem to bear no particular relationship to the doctrine of forgiveness, *per se*; many of the same policies and practices have traditionally been taken to follow from the application of the Gospel to the social and political aspects of life and to be justified by an appeal to broadly orthodox, Christian theological commitments. There are Christian imperatives to 'love your enemies', to 'do good to those who persecute you', 'to go the extra mile', 'to turn the other cheek', and to 'remember those who are in prison' (Heb 13:3, cf. Matt 15:36). The Parable of the Good Samaritan makes it clear that 'good neighbourliness' requires Christians to assist and to come to the relief of those in need, even to attend to the needs of enemies. Moreover, the behaviour which follows from Christian injunctions to show charity (*agape*) and to practise justice is not private and cloistered, but public and social; and on occasions even political (as in Christian involvement in the movement for civil rights for African Americans in the late 1950s and 1960s). Torrance again provides a clear illustration of the weakness of which I am speaking. In exploring the implications of his interpretation of political forgiveness as unconditional forgiveness for the criminal justice system, he affirms that 'no facet of punishment can or should be a reflection or expression of hatred of the guilty'; that the dignity of the guilty, of potential perpetrators, and of the victim must be recognised; and finally that the state must not

[27] See note 7, to which may be added his more recent contribution to this theme, Alan Torrance, *The Theological Grounds for Advocating Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Sociopolitical Realm* (Belfast: Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland, 2006).

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endorse practices which fail 'to uphold the dignity of the criminal, serve to denigrate society and dehumanise its members'.[28] There is nothing here which can not be affirmed by Christians who believe that men and women are created in the image and likeness of God. Human beings possess a (super)natural dignity because they are created by God; this is what is meant by Christian affirmations that human life is sacred: God is the creator of all humankind and redeemer of those who turn to him in repentance and faith. Christians are not required to believe in the unconditional nature of God's forgiveness and historically have not appealed to this particular interpretation of forgiveness to find theological resources to condemn inhuman practices and dehumanising modes of punishment.

The third weakness in the literature is that much Christian talk of political forgiveness remains at the level of generality. I say 'much' here, and not 'all', for there are noteworthy and important exceptions, Robert Shriver and John de Gruchy, for example.[29] The real challenge for a Christian theology of political forgiveness is to show what it means in specific circumstances. For example, what would the practice of political forgiveness in Northern Ireland mean? What policies does commitment to political forgiveness require in a society where government itself is simultaneously accused by the Catholic community of complicity in past violence and by the Protestant community of ignoring the proper claims of justice in pursuit of 'peace', so called? What system of criminal and social justice best instantiates the principle of forgiveness in a society where the Catholic community is believed by the Protestant community to have achieved forgiveness without the need for any admission of wrong and the Catholic community believes itself historically to have been denied justice by the Protestant community? Christians have to relate their beliefs and convictions to changing political and social circumstances and to the fortunes of particular communities in particular societies. Politics may be (as Bismarck said) 'the art of the possible', but what is politically possible is constantly evolving in relation to social, economic and political influences, not to mention changing interpretations of 'the past'. Perhaps positively it can be said that it is only recently that theologians have come to appreciate the relevance of the doctrine of forgiveness to the social and political realms of existence, and consequently we should not expect fully rounded and comprehensive interpretations and applications. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify the emerging outline of a shared theological account

[28] Ibid., pp. 27–9.

[29] Donald W. Shriver Jr., *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics*, and his more recent *Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to Remember its Misdeeds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); de Gruchy, *Reconciliation*.

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of political forgiveness, even though much work remains to be done in applying this account to particular situations.

A careful reading of the literature reveals that there are two themes which are characteristic of theological accounts of political forgiveness: the first is condemnation of the use of violence by Christians;[30] and the second is the affirmation that forgiveness is unconditional, and consequently that forgiveness should be expressed and shown to one's enemies before repentance.[31] Those who hold this view naturally believe that forgiveness should also be granted unconditionally at the level of personal relationships; the importance of unconditional forgiveness when applied at the political level is that it is believed to offer the possibility of a new beginning for formerly alienated groups and communities. This second feature seems to be the defining characteristic of political forgiveness as interpreted by contemporary Christian theologians; and for this reason our discussion will focus upon it, but not before we have said something briefly on the theme of violence in relation to forgiveness and reconciliation.

There is an ambiguity in the expression that Christians should be opposed to 'the use of violence'. It may mean that Christians should not engage in violence, while appreciating that the use of violence is properly distinguished from the use of force, which is that form of violence which is legally and morally sanctioned, or it may also mean that Christians should be exclusively non-violent, that is, that Christians should be pacifists, and at the very least be opposed to any use of physical force. Certainly some Christian proponents of political forgiveness are pacifists and implicit in their condemnation of violence is the denial that any kind of legitimate moral distinction can be drawn between the use of physical force and the use of violence. The issue of Christian pacifism, however, is broader than that of Christian condemnations of the use of violence. The essential point is that pacifism is not distinctive of theological interpretations of political forgiveness; and for this reason we will not discuss it further. On a straightforward reading, condemnation of the use of violence by proponents of political forgiveness is compatible with support for the use of physical force in situations where necessary moral criteria are met. One can be an advocate of political forgiveness and not a pacifist. Equally, condemnation of violence, along with efforts both to bring an end to violence and to alleviate its effects, is a moral valuation which should be endorsed by all Christians, whether they are supporters of

[30] As in Hughes, 'The Politics of Forgiveness', who identifies forgiveness with non-violent opposition to violence, p. 270; also Miroslov Volf in 'Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Justice', pp. 863–6, and in *Exclusion and Embrace*, pp. 275–306.

[31] De Gruchy, *Reconciliation*, p. 172; and the references listed in notes 6–10.

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political forgiveness or not. Strictly speaking, according to its proponents, unconditional forgiveness should be granted to perpetrators of violence while violence continues, for presumably *unconditional* means not conditioned by any conditions such as continuing commitment to violence and the performance of violent acts. Of course the forgiving of perpetrators of violence by victims is, among other things, intended to move the perpetrators to renounce violence and embrace peaceful political solutions: offenders are moved by the unconditional forgiveness of their victims to turn from their violent ways and embrace the way of peace and reconciliation. Unconditional forgiveness aims to bring about a cessation of violence, for it is difficult to speak seriously of reconciliation in the midst of continuing hostilities.[32]

The obvious challenge to the doctrine of *unconditional* forgiveness, whether applied to individuals or to groups, is that it does not express what is taught about forgiveness in the New Testament. This teaching has already been summarised. This does not mean that the doctrine of conditional forgiveness is either uncontroversial or uncontested. There are those who profess to find the doctrine of unconditional forgiveness in the New Testament; it is a matter of interpretation and judgement. Appeal is often made to Jesus' words in Matthew instructing his followers to 'forgive seventy times seven', though this is hardly decisive, as the parallel account in Luke 17:3–4 includes a reference to the requirement for repentance. Elsewhere Matthew speaks plainly of the need for repentance in order to enter the kingdom (Matt 4:17); Jesus' ministry in Matthew 9:13 is described as calling sinners to repentance and in Matthew 11:20–3 Jesus warns of judgement and condemnation for the people of the towns in which he ministered because they did not repent and turn to God. Another verse which is sometimes used to give support to unconditional forgiveness is Jesus' plea for forgiveness for his executioners, recorded in Luke 23:34; this verse (whose authenticity in the text is disputed) is probably best interpreted as meaning that Christ was willing to forgive those who put him to death. Luke should not be interpreted in this passage or elsewhere as suggesting that forgiveness from God does not require any response from those who are forgiven, for it is he of all New Testament writers who most frequently and explicitly links forgiveness to repentance.[33] Forgiveness is a gift of grace which has to be *received*. The argument developed

[32] For most secular writers the end of hostilities is the sine qua non of forgiveness and reconciliation, as e.g. Trudy Govier, *Taking Wrongs Seriously* (New York: Humanity Books, 2006), p. 17.

[33] See N. T. Wright's discussion of repentance in the Synoptic Gospels in *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 246–58; also see Luise Schottroff, 'Das Gleichnis vom verloren Sohn', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 68 (1971), pp. 27–52.

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here contends that theological endorsements of unconditional forgiveness are not responsible interpretations of the relevant New Testament passages.

The issue is not, however, only whether conditional or unconditional forgiveness is taught in the New Testament; there is also the issue of whether conditional or unconditional forgiveness coheres with other basic Christian doctrines. Our earlier discussion suggests that conditional forgiveness best coheres with the justice and righteousness of God and his moral nature. Unconditional forgiveness fails both to uphold the sanctity of the moral law, which for Christians is an expression of the character and nature of God, and to account for the sacrificial imagery and language which is used to interpret the death of Christ by the writers of the New Testament.

To say that offenders should be unconditionally forgiven invites the obvious question 'forgiven by whom?'. Presumably they should be forgiven by their victims. However, when the doctrine of forgiveness is applied to the political realm it must in addition require that the state and the community forgive. In a sense political forgiveness must carry this wider application to qualify as *political* forgiveness, for if forgiveness is not extended beyond the realm of interpersonal relations to incorporate political groupings the designation of forgiveness as political is redundant. What does forgiveness mean in a political context? Christian forgiveness at a personal level involves the relinquishing of animosity and anger and the restoration to fellowship of the offender: forgiveness means that the offender is treated as if he or she has not committed the offending act. By extension, at the political level forgiveness must mean that offending nations, communities and groups, say terrorist groups, are similarly not punished for their offences. Punishment of the guilty (or holding them to further account) is incompatible with forgiveness, in that forgiveness wipes away guilt. Furthermore, *unconditional* forgiveness requires that forgiveness is shown to groups and communities who have not requested it and who have not expressed contrition or admitted wrong: there is no necessary requirement for repentance, apology, reparations and the like. Yet there is a certain moral 'oddness' about groups granting forgiveness to other groups who have not requested forgiveness and who have not admitted committing any wrong. If the guilty are reinstated to their former place in society (or allowed to continue to hold their privileged place in society) without an admission of guilt or expression of contrition, they are tacitly encouraged to commit the same offences again, for no punishment or sanction befalls such actions (they can even escape moral opprobrium once the victims unconditionally forgive). In addition, if offenders have not acknowledged their guilt then they are as committed to the 'rightness' of their former behaviour as before; and this of course is a barrier to reconciliation and trust. Alternatively, if Christian advocates of political

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forgiveness acknowledge some, however limited, role for punishment (of whatever form) or perhaps press for some reform of existing injustices (in the name of justice), then forgiveness means something different at the level of social and group relations than it means at the level of personal relations.

Theologically, forgiveness sets punishment of the offender aside and reinstates the (reformed) offender. In a strict sense, if a group or community unconditionally forgives another group or community, as called upon by Christian advocates of political forgiveness, then that is the end of the matter – the guilty group is reinstated and positive relationships are initiated or resumed. One cannot then require former oppressors to enter into discussion regarding an acknowledgement of guilt or a commitment to just practices and actions in the future, for forgiveness is already granted; and if the group continues its unjust ways, forgiveness will continue. The truth is that advocates of political forgiveness do extend their conversations to include these other issues, and therefore give expression to the view that unconditional forgiveness falls short of a new positive relationship between (former) enemies – in which case the notion of forgiveness is not unconditional at all!

Enough has been said to indicate that the notion of political forgiveness as employed by a number of recent Christian theologians is not unproblematic, in that it gives rise to a number of theological and moral conundrums. These derive from two related sources. The first relates to the application of forgiveness to that of larger collective groups and communities outside the church (in the New Testament the application is limited to the realm of personal relations and personal relationships within the church). The reconciliation to which the church witnesses is that of reconciliation between God and individuals, and subsequently reconciliation between individuals, including individuals who belong to different communities and groups which are historically estranged from each other. Problems arise theologically and morally when forgiveness is granted to groups and communities whose individual members do not admit personal responsibility or acknowledge any wrongdoing. The second relates to the effect of severing the (biblical) link between forgiveness and repentance. It is the conditional nature of forgiveness on repentance which provides the point of departure for a new positive relationship between formerly estranged parties; in the absence of repentance future relationships must necessarily take a more pragmatic and cautious course.

The natural question to ask, in conclusion, is that if the doctrine of forgiveness does not provide a particularly useful or appropriate basis for Christian social engagement, what Christian beliefs and convictions do provide the resources for the church to minister effectively to post-conflict

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situations or to communities currently in conflict with each other. The traditional answer is that the Christian notion of righteousness/justice provides the conceptual resources for positive social engagement. The advantage of the Christian doctrine of justice over that of forgiveness is that justice is multidimensional: Christian justice includes the idea of fairness, that of mercy, that of restoration and reform and so on. Giving a different weighting to these different aspects may be appropriate in different situations in which the church has to minister: the context will determine the particular form Christian justice will take. The implication of our discussion is that Christian love is expressed in two different ways, that of forgiveness upon repentance within the community of the faithful and that of justice tempered by mercy in the socio-political realm. Both personal and social righteousness are concerns of the church, but they are concerns to which the church witnesses in two different but complementary ways.

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