Safe as Churches: Forgiving the Unforgiveable?

Introduction

This title, 'forgiving the unforgiveable?' is deliberate. We may interpret it as asking whether there really is anything that is unforgiveable, or we may understand it to mean that there are indeed things that are unforgiveable and, confronted with such events, what is the response of forgiveness. I think there is a constant interplay between these two meanings. Furthermore I do think that from time to time we encounter situations where the word 'unforgiveable' springs naturally to mind and on such occasions we do not take ourselves to speaking metaphorically or symbolically. At the moment we say or think, 'That's unforgiveable,' we really mean it. Now I will suggest that it's just across such a threshold that forgiveness when and where offered, seeks to engage most fully.

I have key points about forgiveness to which I would like to draw your attention. There is not sufficient time to develop any of them with the sufficiency they deserve, but I hope by digging into one particular theme (forgiveness and memory) I may be able to show the interrelationship between some of these points.

1. Forgiveness, where and when offered, is inevitably accusatory. To say, 'I forgive you,' is to entail, 'I accuse you.' And if I accept that offer of forgiveness, I implicitly accept the accusation, too. Forgiveness implies a recognition on the part of both the victim and the perpetrator of the state of affairs that led to the offer of forgiveness. Thus forgiveness is definitely not an easy option;
2. From a Christian perspective forgiveness is driven by a theological imperative. This does not imply that forgiveness is not therapeutic; that it may not help the victim to 'move on' in her or his life, but it is to say that a solely therapeutic understanding of forgiveness is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for forgiveness within a Christian paradigm;
3. Forgiveness does not necessarily equate with reconciliation. It may be the case that reconciliation does in some cases, follow from forgiveness. But there are good reasons to suppose that it does not—indeed cannot—follow in all. Similarly reconciliation may not necessarily involve forgiveness, as for example in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
4. In connection with the previous point, there is a substantial body of theological and philosophical opinion which would argue that forgiveness is a gift which does not restore balance or symmetry. Derrida would be an

example of this position in his argument that forgiveness is most itself when there is no balance or economic exchange between the victim and the perpetrator.[1]

5. As a consequence of this alleged lack of balance or symmetry, forgiveness, understood from the perspective of this hyperbolic ethic, may, and often does, offend our sense of justice. I would suggest that when this happens forgiveness is being understood in a way that is more rather than less theological.
6. There are evident dangers present in any discourse on forgiveness. A primary danger is the potential for manipulation of the victim by suggesting to him or her that 'one ought to forgive' – this can obviously lead to re-victimisation. We are rightly wary of urging others to forgive those who have offended or abused them. It is the victim's prerogative to forgive – only he or she may properly take the initiative and only he or she may decide if and when the time is right.

The way I want to pick up and develop some of these points is through a brief consideration of the relationship between forgiveness and memory.

Forgive and Forget?

Let's forgive and forget, runs a well-known saying. On the other hand, as Albert Einstein commented on the Shoah, 'by all means let us forgive but never let us forget.' Who is right? Those who say that it is impossible to forgive without forgetting, or those who claim that forgetting almost obliterates the need for forgiveness? Could it be that instead of forgiveness requiring forgetfulness, what it most requires is the constructive and intentional use of memory. But might there not also be a place for us to talk about a sort of forgetting—even if we need to find another way of describing it? What exactly is the relationship between forgiveness and memory, and between anamnesis and amnesia?

Let us pose the question in the form of a dilemma. If events in the past that require forgiveness must remain marooned or isolated in their pastness, then it would seem that the only possibility of forgiveness resides in a negative forgetting—a sort of obliteration of the past. But if the past is unchangeable, it would seem that past hatreds and hurts are likewise unchangeable and permit no transformation. This means that so long as one hates, one doesn't forgive, and so long as there remains a fault or offence, one does not forgive. So, if there is a situation in which this fault or offence no longer intrudes, it must be because it

[1] Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, London: Routledge, 2005.

has been entirely forgotten. On being forgotten, the fault can be forgiven. But of course once the fault has been forgotten it no longer needs to be forgiven, and therefore as soon as forgiveness becomes possible, it is already redundant.[2] You see the problem.

Virgil Elizondo in an article entitled 'I Forgive but I Do Not Forget,' writes that growing up with the slogan 'forgive and forget' he simply assumed that forgiving was equivalent to forgetting and vice versa. However this produced a dilemma for him. He continues, 'yet forgetting was never easy and it often seemed that the more I wanted to forget, the more the memory of the past persisted. The hurt was still there. Had I not forgiven because I could not forget? Often new experiences of guilt accompanied the inability to forget—feeling guilty about not being able to forgive because I had not forgotten.' Clearly we need some analysis of what is meant by forgiveness, what is meant by forgetting, and the relationship between them.

When I forget something I put it out of my mind, though when I say that 'I' put it out of my mind I do not mean that I necessarily *intend* such a thing. Forgetting most often appears unintentional. But when I do forget something, it is out of my mind. It is no longer consciously present. Does that mean that it is no longer present at all; no longer unconsciously present? To that Freud will give a resounding No. In fact Freud, Nietzsche and Heidegger all maintained, albeit in different ways and for varying reasons, the declining prestige of memory and correlatively the increasing prestige of amnesia. Yet each of them was profoundly concerned about this amnesia, for it was not as though the past had been erased: only repressed. This meant that the past had not really been dealt with and thus for Freud and Heidegger the past had to be remembered in order that we might be healed. And perhaps here we have a clue that will lead us on to forgiveness.

Poised Between Remembering and Forgetting

I suppose the Holocaust or the Shoah is the paradigmatic event to which people turn when they ask whether forgiveness is possible. And if there is any *one* prescription to which that event has given rise, it is to *remember*. To forget would amount to breaking faith with the victims. A key voice in this approach is Elie Wiesel who remarked that, 'We remember Auschwitz and all that it symbolizes because we believe that, in spite of the past and its horrors, the world is worthy

[2] John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, New York: Routledge, 2003, 56.

of salvation; and salvation, like redemption, can be found only in memory.'[3] But is memory an unambiguous good? And is it obvious that we should associate the memory of wrongs done to us with anything positive? While the memory of past pleasure may re-present past pleasure, so the memory of past pain may just as easily replicate past pain. Moreover, a memory for past offences may be destructive. Consider, for example, the reflections of Amos Elon on contemporary Israeli politics in an article entitled, 'The Politics of Memory,' where he wrote: 'I have lived in Israel most of my life and have come to the conclusion that where there is so much traumatic memory, so much pain, so much memory innocently or deliberately mobilized for political purposes, a little forgetfulness might finally be in order.'[4]

In the remainder of this paper I want to suggest that the world in which we live will continually bring forth situations in which forgiveness is called for. A challenge facing those of us who confront radical evil in various forms of abuse is 'to remember rightly in a violent world.' Indeed I think if I'm pressed to give to a working definition of forgiveness it would be 'to remember rightly in a violent world.'[5]

Miroslav Volf asks whether 'good remembering in some situations might even *aim* at proper 'forgetting.'' But what is such a 'forgetting?' It is, says Volf, more accurately described as a 'not-coming-to-mind.' This is not what we usually mean by forgetting. Forgetting has a broad range of meanings ranging from the unintentional through to the intentional deleting of what we once knew. So 'not-coming-to-mind' is not the same as forgetting. But neither is repression synonymous with 'not-coming-to-mind.' Repression is a highly motivated forgetting which is driven essentially by a negative experience. 'We cannot bear to remember; therefore, we push an experience out of our conscious memory and into our unconscious memory.[6]

'Not-coming-to-mind' is perhaps best captured by the image of the fading of memories in such a way that the memory of an abuse is no longer as painful and immediate as it once was; that it ceases to be 'affectively operative.' But when and where such 'not-coming-to-mind' happens is not a result of human will-power, nor is it consequence of 'affective entropy' whereby the memory of the

[3] Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences*, New York: Summit, 1990, 201.
[4] Amos Elon, *New York Review of Books*, 40, No.16, 1993, 3-5.
[5] This is the subtitle of Miroslav Volf's brilliant little book on forgiveness and memory, see below.
[6] Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly In a Violent World*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006, 145-147.

offence somehow wears out. It is instead, at least theologically considered, an act of divine grace. And since such a 'not-coming-to-mind' is a divine gift it follows that 'one should never *demand* of those who have suffered that they "forget" and move one. This *impossible* advice would also be the *wrong* advice…The term 'not-coming-to-mind' underscores the passivity of the agent and fits with the idea that 'not-coming-to-mind' is a consequence of God's gift' and not something that one can bring about through dint of sheer human will-power.[7]

I hope that I am not leaving you with an impression that I think amnesia is preferable to memory. On the contrary, I think that anamnesis trumps amnesia. I think the task we face is not simply to remember the past but rather to re-member it and re-narrate it. This obliges us not simply to bring the past to mind, but neither does it tilt us to the other extreme of dismissing or repressing the past: pretending that it never happened.

It is significant, I think, that in the 'blotting out' of the past which we encounter in some Old Testament passages the past is not so much obliterated as re-narrated. Thus when God promises to blot out Israel's transgressions and not to remember Israel's sins [Isaiah 43:25 and Jer. 31:34], God is not simply letting bygones be bygones. Rather God is testifying to his faithfulness. Moreover such forgiveness provides a way to narrate the history of Israel's sinfulness within the context of God's covenant of grace. To be sure, such a narration makes it possible, and even necessary to 'forget' the sin. But the past itself, the history, is and needs to be remembered so that a new and renewed future becomes possible.' In this regard it is worth recalling Henri Nouwen's comment to the effect that 'by cutting off the past we paralyse our future.' True enough, but is our destiny to be forever haunted by our past? I think not, and neither, I suggest, does the Christian tradition.

Thus Milbank believes that the Augustinian account of the inseparability of time and memory can be helpful here. Referring to the *Confessions* he suggests that what Augustine has to say can clarify the issue of *divine* forgiveness.[8] Augustine claims that 'neither future nor past exists, and it is inexact language to speak of three times—past, present and future. Perhaps it would be exact to say: there are three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, a present of things to come…The present concerning the past is the memory, the present concerning the present is immediate awareness, the present concerning the

[7] Volf, *End of Memory*, 146.
[8] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 51ff.

future is expectation.' *Confessions* XI, 26. On this understanding the past exists only through memory and, while this doesn't 'abolish the ontological inviolability and irreversibility of pastness, it does mean that the event in its very originality is open to alteration and mutation.' As Milbank goes on to say, 'Augustine correctly saw, one cannot imagine, and there could not be, any entirely discrete event unaffected by what came later, just as, to use his example, a note in music is only situated and defined by its place in a sequence, such that the end of a musical composition still to be heard can change the nature of what we have already heard.'[9] Of course this does not mean that the past is totally malleable, but I think Milbank is right in his claim that Augustine's reflections reveal that the past is not strictly unalterable and that the remembered past, although provisional and revisable, is not a sort of hypothesis that can never be confirmed, but is rather itself the ontologically real past. For us there is no past behind, as it were, the remembered past.

Another key aspect for us to consider in relation to memory and forgiveness is the eucharist. The eucharist is an action of memory *par excellence*. As a participant in a Eucharistic community the issue of whether I will choose to remember or forget is hardly one that is neutral. By our continual celebration of the eucharist we are constantly fighting against the temptation of amnesia. Gregory Jones, in speaking of the eucharist and forgiveness has suggested that: 'By encountering the real presence of the crucified and risen Christ in his forgiving love, we can bear the past truthfully. We can do in hope. We can do so, recognizing that the eucharist is an Easter feast—a feast that does not occur without Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, but one that is ultimately defined by the hopeful future rather than the sinful past.'[10] Or as Rowan Williams put it: 'if forgiveness is liberation, it is also a recovery of the past in hope, a return of memory, in which what is potentially threatening, destructive, despair-inducing, in the past is transfigured into the ground of hope.'[11]

Conclusion

I want to conclude with a short reflection on the destiny of memory. At the end of the *City of God* when Augustine gives his vision of the heavenly city and of human destiny he distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge of evil, which he correlates with two kinds of memory. Augustine's words are addressed both to perpetrators and to victims. Although he speaks of 'forgetting' he uses the

[9] Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 53.
[10] L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, 177.
[11] Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1982, 32.

term not in the sense of obliteration or repression of the past, but rather in the sense of 'not-coming-to-mind.' In the heavenly city the soul 'will be freed from all evil and filled with all good…forgetting all offences, forgetting all punishments. Yet it will not forget its own liberation, nor be ungrateful to its liberator. It will remember even its past evils as far as intellectual knowledge is concerned; but it will utterly forget them as far as sense experience is concerned. For the highly trained physician is acquainted with almost all diseases, as far as they can be known in theory, while he is ignorant of most of them in respect of personal experience, since he has not suffered from them. Thus, knowledge of evil is of two kinds: one in which it is accessible to apprehension by the mind, the other in which it is a matter of direct experience…There are two corresponding ways of forgetting evil…The scholar forgets by neglecting his studies; the sufferer, by escaping from his misery. The saints will have no sensible recollection of past evils; theirs will be the second kind of forgetfulness by which they will be set free from them all…'[12] And yet in some way the memory of past offences will be preserved in order that the saints may praise the God who has delivered them from the anguish of past traumas.

Forgiveness is not a prudential action. In fact it is an extremely imprudent one, demanding great risk with no guarantee of reward. Forgiveness is an act of grace and the more improbable forgiveness is, the closer it is to being real forgiveness. Extravagant and profligate it offends our sense of propriety, as in Jesus' reply to Peter's question, Lord, how many times should I forgive? As many as seven times? only to hear, 'there is no limit.' I don't know whether I can really hear that, but I know that it has been my privilege to be in the company of at least one person who could and did really hear it. The forgiveness which she practiced and practices is to my mind unimaginable.[13] I could not imagine urging her or indeed anyone to practice that profound forgiveness, and I know I could not be persuaded by another to practice it, but I also know that when and where it happens, it's real and when we see it we know it's an act of God's grace for it imitates the God who is gracious.

[12] Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Bettenson, London: Penguin, 2003.
[13] Jeanne Ruff-O'Herne, *Fifty Years of Silence*, Sydney: Random House, 2008.