

'Forgiveness and Reconciliation'

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'Grace is getting something you don't deserve; and mercy is not getting something that you do deserve.' Francis Bacon

In this paper, I will set out a view of what I believe forgiveness to be and then go on to talk specifically about how African conceptions inform our understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation.

One of the much-quoted psychological definitions of forgiveness is that developed by Enright and the Human Development Study Group. It proposes that:

'Forgiveness is the overcoming of negative affect and judgement toward the offender, not by denying ourselves the right to such affect and judgement, but endeavouring to view the offender with benevolence, compassion, and even love, while recognising that he or she has abandoned the right to them. The important parts of this definition are as follows: (a) one who forgives has suffered a deep hurt, thus showing resentment; (b) the offended person has a moral right to resentment but overcomes it nonetheless; (c) a new response to the other accrues, including compassion and love; (d) this loving response occurs despite the realisation that there is no obligation to love the offender'

In this definition, forgiveness is not set within a larger conceptual framework. It is a secular definition. It fails to explain why human beings should find themselves forgiving others at all. And here I am not referring to *post hoc* explanations, for example, that it does the individual good to forgive, or that the emotional well being of someone who forgives is enhanced. What I mean is that the definition fails to hint at the counter-intuitive magnanimity that forgiving another person often entails, except for the reference to the idea of love. I must confess that on my first reading of this definition, I was immediately reluctant to accept that forgiveness required 'loving' the offender. In other words, I thought that it was quite possible to forgive and yet not to use the language of love. The people one offends most often, on a day-to-day basis, are people whom one already loves. Therefore, the question of love preceding or being the ground on which forgiveness is founded on a daily basis. In the situation where there is a relationship of victim and perpetrator with a stranger, one may question whether love enters the dynamic or not. Compassion definitely does.

There are psychologists who hold the view that mature forgiveness is not a replacement of negative and hateful feelings with loving feelings. So, for example, Gartner, who holds this view, would claim that it is the capacity to hold an integrated and realistic view of the perpetrator that counts. In a sense, this response evades the crucial issue of love. The questions that definitions of forgiveness raise

include 'what is the groundwork on which forgiveness is built? What role does compassion play in this situation and what is compassion anyway? What is love in this context?' I will return to these issues later on.

Enright's definition eschews any reference to religious or theological framework. It is obvious that forgiveness in the religious context exists within the context of our relationship to God and within the boundaries of the problem of sin and evil. Thus, in a theological analysis, it is impossible to consider the forgiveness of another person outside of the context of God's forgiveness. Our own readiness to forgive others lies in relation to God's willingness to forgive us. 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others their trespass against us'.

It could also be argued that what are being forgiven are not mere acts of trespass but evidence of sin and evil. Thus, the forgiveness of these sins or acts of evil prepare the ground for healing, that is, act to transform both the lives of the forgiving and the forgiven individuals. For Patton, human forgiveness is:

'Not doing something but discovering something – that I am more like those who have hurt me than different from them. I am able to forgive when I discover that I am in no position to forgive. Although the experience of God's forgiveness may involve confession of, and the sense of being forgiven for specific sins, at its heart it is the recognition of my reception into the community of sinners – those affirmed by God as his children'

Patton's description emphasizes the fact that we are ourselves undeserving of forgiveness and, therefore, not in a position to forgive others. Thus, the mutuality of sinfulness is underlined even though the specific offence or sin in question may not be shared; we all share in the certainty of being equally sinful in the eyes of God. In this description, my forgiving another is as much about humbling myself in the recognition of my own need for grace.

To summarise, forgiveness can be defined as a response to a moral wrong in which there is restraint from pursuing resentment or revenge. It is the response of one single person to injustice suffered.

'Ultimately we must concentrate on forgiveness and reconciliation because if we concentrate on retribution, I am fearful that the spiral of violence, resentment and payback will never end'

Desmond Tutu

There is nothing in the foregoing that is specifically African, either in perspective or conception. In searching for a uniquely African dimension to the experience of forgiveness and reconciliation, one must be careful not to imply that there are categorical differences in how human beings perceive the world. In other words, we must be

careful not to seek to reify the particular as if the accentuated difference of the particular, confirms difference of temperament or constitution. There is also the danger of thinking that there is a uniquely African perspective to anything. I have argued elsewhere, that Africa is so disparate that to attempt to classify African cultures or values, as uniquely African is doomed to failure. The reverse is also true: borrowing or dependence. It only underlines the fact of the strength of our common humanity. In other words universal concepts and values do exist. My final caveat is that what this very particular African has to say can only ultimately be true for Nigerians who are Yoruba, indeed who are Ekiti Yorubas, born into a Christian home. Culture is not a crystalline structure, set and immobile, but a growing and dynamic entity. Often, what is described as African is a fossilised value or practice from the 19th century or early 20th century, commented upon by academics, regardless of the fact that no such pure practice currently exists.

My starting point is the situation in South Africa of the extraordinary Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This was South Africa's response to its history. In his foreword to the Final Report, Desmond Tutu wrote: 'Having looked the beast of the past in the eye, having asked and received forgiveness and having made amends, let's shut the door on the past – not in order to forget it but in order not to allow it to imprison us'. This statement draws attention to why Tutu thinks forgiveness and reconciliation are so important, that is to free us from history. In Chapter 5, Volume I, the conceptual framework of the commission's work is discussed. The Commission saw reconciliation as a goal to help people come to terms with painful truth and to help reconcile victims and perpetrators. Thus, the commission stated that 'the Commission's quest for truth should be viewed as a contribution to a much longer-term goal and vision. Its purpose in attempting to uncover the past had nothing to do with vengeance; it had to do, rather, with helping victims to become more visible and more valuable citizens through the public recognition and official acknowledgement of their experiences'. The Commission goes on, 'the road to reconciliation requires more than forgiveness and respectful remembrance reconciliation requires not only individual justice, but also social justice'. The Commission is identifying a distinction between forgiveness, reconciliation and justice.

It is probably worth exploring the nature of this distinction. At an ordinary level, to forgive is already to forgo punishment or vengeance. To forgive is to pardon an offence or offender, or to cease to resent, or to remit a debt, that is to give up one's claim against a debtor. In this respect, justice is not done; it is abrogated, if justice is to mean restitution or punishment. To reconcile is to restore what is out of harmony. It may entail forgiveness or not. The restoration of concord may entail no more than open acknowledgement of harm caused and experienced by both parties respectively as prerequisite for reconciliation.

How does justice relate to these concepts? Retributive justice is the idea of seeking to balance an injustice by rectifying the situation, or

by regaining equality that the injustice overturned. It is most simply summed up in the principle of 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth'. Rectification suggests taking from the offender and giving to the injured party, whereas retribution at least acknowledges that this is sometimes impossible, but embodies the idea that an offence may cry out for punishment and that the moral order is out of balance until this is administered. This suggests that a *real world* concept of forgiveness may encompass retributive justice. In other words that the individual who has suffered harm may forgive the individual who has caused the harm, but the sufferer may still have rights of restitution and the perpetrator may still be punished, all at the same time that both parties are reconciled. This issue was recognised by the Commission. The Commission went on to say that restorative justice demands that the accountability of perpetrators be extended to making a contribution to the restoration of the well being of their victims; furthermore that those who have benefited and are still benefiting from a range of unearned privileges under apartheid have a crucial role to play by contributing to the present and future reconstruction of society.

The examples of rare acts of forgiveness from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Hearings are worth hearing: Desmond Tutu gave an example of the former head of Ciskei Defence force and four officers giving evidence in relation to the Bisho massacre. This was in the presence of a packed hall full of people who had either been injured or had lost loved ones. One soldier turned to the audience and said 'Please forgive us, please. The burden of the Bisho massacre will be on our shoulders for the rest of our lives'. He was white and the three other soldiers were black and he went on to plead, 'Would you please receive my colleagues back into the community?' Desmond Tutu reported that 'It was unbelievable, unexpected. You could sense the presence of grace right there, because that audience, angry as they had been, almost immediately turned around and broke out in applause. Here were people who were limping, who were shot, some had lost children or other loved ones, and they could applaud'.

In another account, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela wrote about Eugene de Kock who is currently serving 212 years for his role in the murder of the apartheid government's enemies. He asked for a private meeting with widows of the victims who died in an incident he had organised. He said 'I wish I could do much more than say I'm sorry. I wish there were a way of bringing their bodies back alive. I wish I could say 'here are your husbands'. But, unfortunately, I have to live with it'. One of the wives said later 'I was profoundly touched by him, especially when he said he wished he could bring our husbands back. I didn't even look at him when he was speaking to us. Yet, I felt the genuineness in his apology. I hope that when he sees our tears, he knows that they are not only tears for our husbands, but tears for him as well. I would like to hold him by the hand and show him that there is a future and that he can still change'.

These examples challenge us to reach some kind of understanding of what makes ordinary people act with such genuine compassion and selflessness as to be able to reach across a gulf,

despite personal suffering and anguish, and to touch someone who has caused great harm. In responding to the question 'Why was such a process as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission possible in South Africa?' Desmond Tutu remarked that it was because of the concept of ubuntu (we are people through other people). He explained that this meant that 'my humanity is caught up in your humanity, and when your humanity is enhanced – whether I like it or not – mine is enhanced as well. Likewise, when you are dehumanised, inexorably, I am dehumanised as well'. He concludes. 'So there is a deep yearning in African society for communal peace and harmony'.

The risk of this kind of talk is that it implies this is something peculiar to African societies to the exclusion of other societies. I do not, for once, agree with this view. Nonetheless, it is worth reviewing what it means to become a person through others. This particular proposition is clearly set out in Martin Buber's 'I and thou.' For Buber, Man becomes an I through a You. He distinguishes relating to an It, in other words to an object, from our relationship to a You, another subject of experience. Of course, Buber's world is dyadic whereas the world that Tutu is conjuring up is a multifold world of subjects constituting the world and giving life to the individual. The individual's existence in this conceptual realm, is dependent on the harmony of the larger group. Here we are not referring to the idea of a faceless, anonymous crowd as Elias Canetti describes in *Crowds and Power*. For Canetti, the attributes of crowds include the desire to grow in size, the equality of all members, the love of density and the need for a goal and so on. However, it is important to note that Canetti is not referring to a group but a crowd. In contrast, we are referring to a very definite, palpable reality of a people living coherently and giving sustenance to the meaningful individuality of the one, in other words to a group. In a group, our individuality is given sustenance and solidity whereas, in a crowd we lose our identity, the singularity of our individuality, in a formless pooling of egos. In this conceptualisation of life, to be unaccounted is to suffer anguish because integration within the whole is central to the existence of the individual. But in the same way, it is a deep hurt in the life of the whole to deprive itself of one of its constituted parts. The sorrow felt is both for the unfulfilled self as it is for the diminished group. In talking about this issue, Segun Gbadegesin, a Yoruba philosopher refers to a common saying, 'I am because we are; I exist because the community exists'. He goes on to say that 'a high premium is placed on the practical demonstration of oneness and solidarity among the members of a community. Every member is expected to consider him/herself as an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards the good of all. Everyone is expected to be the keeper and protector of the interests of others who are, by extension, theirs too'. He concludes that 'all the above point to the value that traditional Yoruba place on community and communal existence, with all its emphasis on fellow-feeling, solidarity and selflessness'.

Extending this argument, Kwasi Wiredu, a Ghanaian philosopher discussing the role of reconciliation in African societies,

referred to the relationship between consensus and reconciliation. Although he does not make this point explicitly, his intention is to distinguish between Western democratic principles, where one individual or a group may determine the outcome to the exclusion of a minority, and African traditional political principles that rely on consensus. The question is, of course, what advantages accrue on account of consensus? In my view, the underlying value is the importance attributed to a harmonious community. The Yorubas have a God, *Ela*, of whom Bolagi Idowu says, 'He organised earth's affairs and set things in their proper places. He is even described as the one who made all things, in the sense that it was through his agency that all things have their being. To him is credited the main functions of peace making and of reconciliation wherever there is discord, and the restoration of order wherever there is chaos'. Consensus building is part of the art of politics. It involves being careful not to exclude any opinion or section of society and it emphasises the reconciliation of difference. One of the verses referring to *Ela* in the *Ifa* corpus reads, 'It is he who puts things right for the people. / When day turned into night in the town of Okerekese, / And the sages of the place were baffled, / It was he who came to the aid of Oluyori, it's king, with a remedy; / Whenever Elegbara plans to turn the world upside down / It is he who obstructs him; / He receives no money / He receives no kola-nuts / Yet it is he who rectifies unhappy destinies.'

The foregoing illustrates how important it is in African communities for there to be a sense of visible harmony within society. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is, in my view, the visible expression of the wish to create a harmonious society. That is not enough to explain the readiness of ordinary people to forgive and to move towards reconciliation despite great privation.

For the Yoruba, the highest accolade is to be described as *oseniyan*, 'knowing how to make a person', that is how to constitute a person. This idea, which is untranslatable into English, sits somewhere between the idea of being humane, sociable, and human. One cannot say it of oneself and when it is said of one, it denotes how one relates to others. It is as if one defined what it is to be human solely with being humane. This definition ascribes our humanity on the basis of our capacity to act well towards others. This, fundamentally, underlines what it means to forgive others. To forgive others is to enter into human commerce with them, to have compassion for their position, and to see the world through their eyes and all this, despite the fact that they may have caused us great and irreparable harm.

You may remember my initial disquiet at the notion of love, and how love enters into what forgiveness is about. However, if we define love as the ability to see the other as oneself, and to recognise the vulnerability of the other and his innate inclination to sin as no different from one's own, then we are facing the other with the attitude of love, no matter that this idea is uncomfortable.

In conclusion, I have sought to argue that forgiveness is a fundamental and pervasive (that is, pervasive across all cultures) human response to a moral wrong that we suffer. It depends on our

capacity to recognise in the other, mutual moral worth, frailty and vulnerability to sin. In the context of societies or nations, where it takes the form of reconciliation, it depends on our wish to promote a particular kind of harmony, underlining our need to inhabit a world of equilibrium. The South African experience demonstrates not only how much need the human spirit has for forgiving harm suffered but also what depths of compassion and reservoir of grace ordinary people possess.

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