

## **'Forgiveness: Psychological and Religious Aspects'**

By Dr Fraser Watts, Starbridge Lecturer in Theology and Natural  
Science,  
University of Cambridge.

There is now a widespread programme of empirical research on forgiveness (see, for example, *Dimensions of Forgiveness*, edited by E L Worthington, Templeton Foundation Press, 1998). A central purpose of this paper will be to evaluate this programme, to see where it helps us to understand forgiveness, and where it may be missing the point. Forgiveness is only one of a series of religious practices that have been raided by the contemporary consumerist world for their practical efficacy. Transcendental Meditation has similarly been taken out of its original context of yogic teaching and general life-style. I will thus concentrate here particularly on issues about forgiveness that arise at the interface of theology and psychology.

Many current therapeutic applications of forgiveness take a cognitive approach and see it in terms of re-framing. There is nothing novel in this, and Bishop Joseph Butler, in his sermon on forgiveness of injuries advocated something similar. He suggested that, if we could achieve a 'due distance' and see the other person's actions as arising from 'inadvertence and mistake' rather than 'malice and scorn', we would find that 'the indignity or injury would almost infinitely lessen, and perhaps at least come out to be almost nothing at all'. It would be hard to find a clearer statement of the principles of attribution therapy in the classic Christian Literature. As I have argued elsewhere, prayer provides a good opportunity for such Christian re-framing of attributions. However, valuable though cognitive aspects of forgiveness may be, they do not exhaust its psychological components. Some, especially Everett Worthington, have stressed the value of empathising with the person to be forgiven. There may also be a place for emotional ventilation, for re-appraisal of costs and benefits, and for other elements.

Some have reacted strongly against the current therapeutic application of forgiveness on theological grounds, and none more so than L.G. Jones in *Embodying Forgiveness* (1995, W.B. Eerdmans). In his view, forgiveness in the New Testament refers solely to the forgiveness of sin and to forgiveness by God. However, it is helpful to bear in mind that there are two quite distinct words for forgiveness in the New Testament. What Jones says may be true of the main words for 'to forgive' in the Gospels ( $\phi$ miemi), but the Pauline concept, to deal graciously (*charizomai*), though often also translated as forgiveness, is clearly broader in its scope. Also, the Lord's Prayer very specifically links God's forgiveness of humanity with people's duty to forgive others.

A more fundamental issue, in my view, is how far forgiveness can be taken out of its original moral context and still be efficacious. It

seems to be an empirical fact that people with no religious commitment can practice forgiveness, and to good effect. What is more doubtful is whether forgiveness remains equally helpful if it is practised out of deliberate self-interest. It has been said, as Professor Sims quoted in his introduction to this symposium, that forgiveness 'is not just altruistic, but the best form of self-interest'. But what effect does forgiveness have if it is practised in a blatantly self-interested way? My hunch is that if forgiveness is to be helpful to the person who practices it, that person may at least need to believe that they are acting altruistically, and to believe in the rightness of what they are doing.

Finally, I want to draw attention to some of the dark aspects of forgiveness, and to try to draw the boundaries between where forgiveness is helpful and where it is not. Though forgiveness is frequently helpful, it is not a universally applicable panacea. There can be considerable dangers in pressing people to forgive if they have no inclination to do so. Especially if people have suffered abuse, to press them to forgive before they are ready may be felt almost as an additional form of abuse.

There are various ways in which the conditions necessary for effective forgiveness may be lacking. If the person who forgives has no positive feelings towards the person they are forgiving, it is doubtful whether it can be helpful. Equally, if there is no sense of penitence on the part of the transgressor, forgiveness may not be helpful. There is also a danger that premature forgiveness may encourage people to flip too quickly into an up-beat mood before they have done the inner work necessary for the benefits of forgiveness to be felt. As James Hillman points out in his book, *Suicide and the Soul* (1964, Hodder & Stoughton) there is a 'soul-making' that comes from allowing distress to run its natural course. Forgiveness has both inner and outer aspects and it is unhelpful for them to become dissociated. If they do, forgiveness becomes either silent, or empty.

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