

Forgiveness: Theological, Psychological and Evolutionary Perspectives

by Dr. Carolyne Call
presented at the Quest Conference April 3-4, 2009¹
Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana
Copyright 2009

In the 1990s, during the Bosnian conflict, there was a convent close to Banja Luka in Bosnia. A number of Roman Catholic Sisters and one priest lived there. On one night the convent was raided by Serbian soldiers. The priest was killed and the Sisters were systematically raped by the soldiers – most of them more than once. The Sisters were then taken to the border where a bridge crossed into Croatia. They were told to walk the bridge to gain their freedom. The bridge was mined. The Sisters walked and survived. A few years later the Sisters returned to their convent. They picked up their ministry to the locals, which included some of the men who had raped them that night. They spoke openly about the need for forgiveness and the need to be witnesses against violence and revenge.

Regardless of their source, many people consider stories of forgiveness on this scale to be remarkable, unusual, and somehow heroic. Yet in many ways the topic of forgiveness is a very ordinary one. After all, it is an aspect of life that shows up routinely in our day-to-day relationships, from the negotiation of offence and reconciliation in friendships, to the overlooking of passing actions by strangers, to the navigation of marriages.

Forgiveness, in its simplest form, seems to be well understood and practiced by most people (within their kin and close networks) – that is, in the give and take, equilibrium-maintaining, let's-keep-moving-forward rhythms of daily living. Yet when

¹ The author wishes to thank the Saint Mary's College Center for Spirituality and the Templeton Foundation for the support of this work through grant funding.

we begin to consider forgiveness on a larger scale such as in response to betrayals, national policies, the murder of children, crimes against humanity and so forth, the discussion becomes more difficult. Suddenly then forgiveness is a complex, multi-faceted and highly contentious issue. This is the case even for those who self-identify as Christian believers.

Forms of forgiveness are manifested in a variety of human cultural behaviors and thus are considered a human universal under certain conditions. And while it appears in aspects of most world religions, it reaches a “summit” in the idea of Christianity (Newberg, d’Aquili, Newberg, & deMarici 2000). I use the term *idea of Christianity* here because while we would affirm its position in the description of the ways Jesus would have us live, we do not, it seems, actually practice forgiveness more than anyone else (Toussaint & Williams 2008).

My goal here, then, is two-fold: First, to seek greater understanding about why it is that forgiveness is so difficult (on any scale), and secondly, to offer insights about how self-identified Christians might claim our theological mandate with greater conviction and success.

Definitional Issues

There is no standard definition of forgiveness. Here I will use McCullough, Pargament and Thoresen’s (2000, p. 9) definition: *Forgiveness is an intra-individual, pro-social change toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within a specific interpersonal context.* This definition focuses on the internal change that happens when a person forgives.

When we forgive someone, our feelings and thoughts about (and possibly behaviors toward) that person change. They become more positive and less negative. Some definitions of forgiveness require the development of feelings of charity or love toward an offender. I am not using that definition here, and my definition does not include reconciliation (related to, but not the same as forgiveness), admission of guilt on the offender's part, or the development of particularly loving feelings toward the offender. The simple approach is most helpful I think and considering forgiveness as a pro-social change toward a perceived aggressor offers enough of a challenge to our behavioral norms. Definitions differ, of course, depending on research and perspective. For my purposes, this one will suffice.

Considering Evolutionary Perspectives

Human beings are animals. This statement is both accurate and, to some, controversial. We cannot deny our biological status in this world nor our similarity to other mammals. Humans are indeed unique in some ways, yet the same could be said of small-mouth bass, giraffes, robins, or carpenter bees. We inhabit a biological, genetic and neurological reality that shares most aspects with other creatures. Evolutionary theory, to my mind, opens up vast stores of insight into the workings of human beings, better enabling us to understand how and why we function the way we do.²

Forgiveness as a particular human action has not been studied in as much detail as some other aspects of human life such as social grouping, kin protection, mate selection and even altruism.³ However, recent scholarship has opened up the topic for greater

² Evangelical Christianity maintains significant disputes with evolutionary theory. However, this author sees no conflict between the two and for the purposes of this paper will not delve into the ongoing philosophical disagreements.

³ See Flescher and Worthen, 2007.

discussion and consideration. The primary person currently exploring the connection between forgiveness and evolution is Michael McCullough, a faculty member in psychology at the University of Miami at Coral Gables, Florida.⁴ McCullough, speaking out of his own research and reflection has reached a few conclusions about the evolutionary development of forgiveness.

To begin, *forgiveness cannot be separated from revenge/vengeance*. They actually work together in the natural world and are not as diametrically opposed as we often describe them. Both operate to maintain the balance and productivity (success) of close networks (usually kin groupings). McCullough (2008) suggests that we think of forgiveness and revenge as a “team of midwives that helped to give birth to human being’s ultra-cooperativeness” (p.90).

For social creatures (such as most primates, wolves, dolphins, some species of fish) the ability of the group to function well is of paramount importance. The group must be able to hunt or forage, mate, reproduce and raise young as a unit in order to survive. All parts of the group must contribute. Thus free riders cannot be tolerated. McCullough provides the example of a certain species of guppy that sends out scouts to check for predatory sunfish, one of their primary environmental threats. Those who lag behind the group will be rounded up and put in front. They cannot remain a part of the group without “pulling their weight.” It appears that revenge (defined as retaliatory behavior toward someone who has harmed you or the group) is often used as a tool for bringing straying or loafing members back into line. It also serves other purposes such as maintaining or protecting status. Revenge is relatively well-understood and makes sense to us. A tit-for-tat mentality speaks of equity to us and of a common sense meaning of fairness.

⁴ See his recent text *Beyond Revenge*, Jossey-Bass 2008.

Forgiveness, on the other hand, may be more complex cognitively and also more difficult in behavioral practice. How does forgiveness work in evolutionary perspective? What does it do to enhance fitness or adaptability?

Forgiveness is a means of maintaining and enhancing valuable relationships, usually within a network. Forgiveness helps preserve relationships that are of biological (or other) utility. However, the relationship must be a valuable one. Forgiveness serves to mend disrupted relationships and this behavior is found in a number of places within the animal kingdom, not just with humans or primates. Researchers call these actions reconciling behaviors – in which a transgressor is brought back into the community, often with attention and touching (Newberg, d'Aquili, Newberg, & deMarici, 2000). The more cohesive a group is, in fact, the more often forgiveness is witnessed. Some primate species are highly cohesive and forgiveness is witnessed more within these groups.

How does this actually work? Within the social animal group the experience of conflict usually results in feelings of *anxiety* among those involved in the altercation (manifested in signs like scratching). This heightened anxiety can drive creatures toward forgiveness; forgiveness acts as a means to eradicate anxiety and a way to reaffirm the relationship. This is how revenge and forgiveness balance one another. So for instance, if a monkey finds food and does not tell the others, and the others find out, they may exact revenge (through banishment) because he injured the group by not sharing valuable information. While banished he experiences anxiety manifested in particular behaviors. He may then seek to reestablish connection with the group, in essence, seeking forgiveness. The group eventually welcomes him back (forgives him) thus strengthening cohesion and preserving the social network.

In evolutionary terms, then, we can say that for most social creatures forgiveness happens under three conditions:

- a. The relationship has value to us now or in the future
- b. The offender is not likely to hurt us again in the future
- c. The offender is worthy of our care or important to us

Because the human brain is more complex than other animals' brains, our response to an offense has a wider range of possible outcomes or choices. We also have the ability to reflect consciously on the pros and cons of forgiving and what might need to happen to enable forgiveness (apology, reparations). The bottom line is that the capacity for forgiveness evolved to further our own self-interest, meaning our fitness and ability to survive. It helps us to maintain a stable set of "cooperation partners" and it only makes evolutionary sense under a certain set of circumstances. Forgiveness does not make evolutionary sense, however, when it does not appear to be in our own self-interest. This would include the forgiveness of harmful strangers, those with whom we have no valuable relationships, and those who we deem are unworthy of our care.

McCullough's response to this non-sensical forgiveness is that we have the tools from our evolutionary history to practice forgiveness. In these unusual circumstances we are simply taking those tools and applying them to people and relationships outside of our kin networks. The question still remains, why participate in this type of apparently non-evolutionary-adapted forgiveness? We know it happens, but we also know it is rare. Why forgive when there is no perceived benefit? The key may be linked to how we define "benefit" and how this definition is connected to our religious or philosophical grounding.

Considering Theological Perspectives

We have a problem with revenge. From what we have learned from other social animals, humans are unique in our tendency to get stuck in revenge cycles. Furthermore, we especially have trouble with revenge when we feel that it is sanctioned by a holy text (Kanekar and Merchant, 1982). Recent research on this topic has found that people are more likely to support revenge or retaliation if they feel it is supported by a holy text such as the Bible. So we need to accept right away that religion per se cannot be assumed to act as a protective device when dealing with revenge. In fact, not much seems to get in the way of our desire for revenge. What can explain this?

Revenge acts on the pleasure circuit of the brain. It engages the part of the brain we use when we are seeking (hunting) and feeds into the positive feelings associated with anticipation (dopamine pathways). This, I believe, is a very important thing to know and of which to be aware. Ruminating about revenge feels good and acts on the reward centers of the brain. Our problem with revenge is that we like it.

But we do not only have a problem with revenge. We also have a problem with forgiveness. Research has demonstrated that Christians (Protestant and Catholic) are aware of the need for forgiveness and definitely value it more than other religious traditions or those with no religious background. However, there is not much evidence that we actually *practice* it more than those other groups. This is a reminder of the divide between moral thought and moral action, one of the perennial problems of being human.

Consider the earlier comment claiming that forgiveness has reached its “summit” in Christianity. Where does this assertion come from? What does Christianity actually have to say about forgiveness? The Greek words translated as “forgiveness” show up

quite often in the New Testament. There are actually two terms: one is used for the forgiveness of sin (by God) and translates better as “pardon” as in the forgiveness of a debt. The other term best translates as our conventional understanding of “forgive” and is used by Jesus, for example, when he tells Peter in Matthew 18 to forgive 77 times if a brother sins against him (or 7x70).

In the Christian tradition, our call to forgive others is directly related to our experience of being forgiven ourselves by God. This is the point in the story of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18 and this has been clear throughout our tradition – we forgive because God first forgave us. However, scripture also claims that we will not be forgiven by God unless we forgive others first (see Mt. 6:12-15). So this is a cycle of forgiveness between an individual and God that is to be at the heart of faith. Most Christians are comfortable with this perspective on forgiveness.

However, Jesus combines his teachings on forgiveness with a demand that we release our desire for revenge. He commands us to love our enemies, and even to pray for those who persecute us. The command to “turn the other cheek” is a denial of the right to exact revenge. Jesus’ teaching to love our enemies is based on an understanding of what it means to love our neighbor. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) teaches that being in the same kin network is not what it means to be neighbors with someone. This is a difficult teaching. Jesus describes one person helping another and both come from radically different backgrounds. Both are perceived in negative ways by the other, especially since Samaritans were considered unclean. This is not a natural caregiving situation. Jesus’ teachings, then, are an interruption of our evolutionary leanings. In fact, he goes so far as to challenge his followers by saying “What good is it if you only

love those who love you? Everybody can do that.” Interpreted in evolutionary terms, “What good is it if you only love within your own kin network? Everyone (even the dogs!) do that!” And this is where the challenge of Christianity is at its most acute: *We are to be more than what comes naturally.*

What Jesus is proposing here is offensive to many people. We approve of the “your sins are forgiven” part of his message (talk about benefiting self interest!) but we balk at how we are then to live in response. Consider the Anabaptist Dirk Williamsz fleeing from his captors in 16th century Europe. Condemned as heretics the Anabaptists could flee or they could succumb to torture and execution. Despite their ravaged existence they preached and practiced strict non-violence. Williamsz, in his attempt to escape, runs across a frozen lake. But his captor falls through the ice – and Williamsz turns back to help the man from the water. He is then captured and killed. This demonstrates radical love of enemy, even forgiveness – with no visible self-interest (Van Bragt 1660, 2000). Stories like this one (in this case from the *Matyr’s Mirror*) demonstrate a deep commitment to Jesus’ teachings on forgiveness and love of enemies. There are *costs* to this type of life and making these choices. It may even cost you your life. In the Christian tradition, we have traditionally held that some things are more valuable than your life on earth. Love and forgiveness appear to be more valuable than life itself.

The call to practice forgiveness becomes even more daunting when we consider the ways that people can be punished by their kin or friend networks for the act of forgiveness. Within many families forgiveness is perceived as a weakness. This is the case as well on national levels or within ethnic conflicts. Much of this reflects

misunderstandings about genuine forgiveness (which is not a license for abuse or a call to forget an offense per se). But even with healthy understandings of what forgiveness entails, we remain reluctant.

The command of *Jesus the teacher* about forgiveness and love of enemies is clear. *Christianity the institution*, on the other hand, has not always held to it or practiced it. But we are still called to this life and this practice. Evolution can help us to understand why we find this message so difficult and why it feels unnatural to us. We are innately in-group, out-group creatures. We protect and forgive the in-group (to a point) and reject the out-group. But we also know that humans are gifted with powerful reflective capacities, also provided to us through evolution, and we can choose to live in particular ways. The more we talk about forgiveness within the church and world, and the more we acknowledge its difficulty, the more progress we will make, I believe. Following this difficult call requires conscious choices in our day-to-day living. It also requires rigorous self-reflection and self-discipline. All are more easily accomplished within a close network of like-minded supporters such as a faith community. The ability to practice forgiveness of those who are outside of our closest networks requires rethinking how we define our networks and who is included within them. If we come to acknowledge the image of God in each person (to use religious language) or come to embrace humanity as “one family” we will be better able to take the necessary steps toward practicing forgiveness. This is a complex process that includes building our empathy capacity and de-centering ourselves (See Enright 2001). Archbishop Desmond Tutu approached much of the reconciliation process in South Africa through this re-framing process with the

help of traditional African philosophy and it had remarkable effects (Tutu, 2000). In fact, even Darwin understood the necessity of re-framing when he wrote,

As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to man of all nations and races. If, indeed, such men are separated from him by great differences in appearance or habits, experience unfortunately shews [sic] us how long it is, before we look at them as our fellow-creatures. (Quoted in McCullough, 2008, p. 191)

Humanity must, eventually, grasp this “one network” perspective more and more – at least if we wish to promote a just and peaceful existence. This is necessary not only for regional or global approaches to forgiveness and reconciliation, but also for individual psychological and physical well-being. However, the practice of forgiveness will always be difficult. We need more robust discussion about what a forgiveness-oriented society might require of nations and groups who wish to move beyond in-group, out-group thinking and bring about reconciliation on a grand scale. Ultimately, however, it begins with us as individuals and how we chose and commit to live. If we call ourselves disciples of Jesus, then the command is a clear one.

References and Further Reading

- American Psychological Association (2006). *Forgiveness: A Sampling of Research Results*. APA Research Briefs.
- Cose, E. (2004). *Bone to Pick: Of forgiveness, reconciliation, reparation and revenge*. New York: Atria Books.
- Enright, R. and J. North (1998). *Exploring Forgiveness*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Enright, R. (2001). *Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Flesher, A. M. & D.L. Worthen (2007). *The Altruistic Species: Scientific, Philosophical, and Religious Perspectives of Human Benevolence*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press.
- Kanekar, S. & S. Merchant (1982). Aggression, Retaliation, and Religious Affiliation. *Journal of Social Psychology* 117, 295-296.
- Karen, R. (2001). *The Forgiving Self: The road from resentment to connection*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Kraybill, D., S.M. Nolt, D.L. Weaver-Zercher (2007). *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.
- McCullough, M., K.I. Pargament & C.E. Thoresen (2000). The Psychology of Forgiveness: History, Conceptual Issues, and Overview, in *Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice*. McCullough, Michael E. (Ed.); Pargament, Kenneth I. (Ed.); Thoresen, Carl E. (Ed.); pp. 91-110. New York, NY, US: Guilford Press.
- McCullough, M. (2008). *Beyond Revenge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Minow, M. (1998). *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Newberg, A.B., E.G. d'Aquili, S.K. Newberg, & V. deMarici (2000). The neuropsychological correlates of forgiveness, in *Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice*. McCullough, Michael E. (Ed.); Pargament, Kenneth I. (Ed.); Thoresen, Carl E. (Ed.); pp. 91-110. New York, NY, US: Guilford Press.
- Schimmel, S. (2002). *Wounds not Healed by Time: The power of repentance and forgiveness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Toussaint, L.L. & Williams, D.R. (2008). National survey results for Protestant, Catholic and nonreligious experiences of seeking forgiveness and of forgiveness of self, of others, and by God. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 27, 120-130.

Tutu, D. (2000). *No Future without Forgiveness*. New York: Random House.

Van Bragt, T. (1660, 2000). *Martyr's Mirror: The Story of 17 Centuries of Christian Martyrdom from the Time of Christ to AD 1660*. Ontario: Herald Press.