

THE HOPE OF FORGIVENESS

ELAINE C LEDGERWOOD

FORGIVENESS IS surely one of the most abused concepts in Christianity; with all too much frequency people are told they should, even must, forgive those who have hurt them. What does this mean for the abused child, the survivor of a concentration camp, or even those who were tortured both in their home countries and when seeking refuge in Australia? Yet forgiveness forms one of the central concepts within Christianity, and indeed, the understanding that humans can be and are forgiven and hence reconciled to God is one of the key differences between Christianity and other religions.

In spite of the centrality of forgiveness, virtually nothing has been written linking forgiveness to hope. A search of major databases¹ uses the key words of ‘hope’ and ‘forgiveness’ revealed no relevant writing linking these concepts. Even though Jürgen Moltmann writes a little about forgiveness, he does so with a very different emphasis to the reflections of those who advocate on behalf of the victims of sin. It is the nuances in these reflections and their connection to hope that will be explored in this article.

A Brief Methodology

A re-examination of suffering and hope arose in theology out of the Second World War in the writings of authors such as Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Sölle.² Since the 1970s little has been written on the topic. Given the time since suffering and hope has been comprehensively explored, the question arose for me as to whether in the light of the rapidly changing world this past theology continues to be a meaningful way of talking about suffering and hope. Would the reflections of contemporary Christians who have supported others in the depths of suffering have anything to add to how theologians explore suffering and hope? In order to answer this, I

interviewed Australian Christians who had supported asylum seekers in the immigration detention centres.³ The conditions in these centres were designed to systematically dehumanise the asylum seekers and to exacerbate the trauma already experienced. Drawing on phenomenology, a social research methodology that seeks to explore the meaning made out of experiences, I systematically reviewed the themes that arose from the reflections of the advocates and used these to compare this to the theology of Moltmann. One discrepancy that arose in this comparison is the place of forgiveness and it is this theme that I will explore in this article.

Forgiveness in Moltmann

Forgiveness is about creating a new beginning for those involved and therefore it is somewhat surprising, in the light of Moltmann’s emphasis on eschatology, that he rarely writes about the meaning of forgiveness. Indeed, he does so only in relation to God forgiving humanity.⁴ Perhaps this is because of his context, that of being identified amongst various oppressive systems—not only as a German living in the generation who fought in the Second World War, but also as a white, male from the first world. Yet at the same time, Moltmann experienced the sense of forgiveness in the aftermath of the Second World War which it has been suggested gave him a special sensitivity to suffering.⁵ Indeed, as a prisoner of war in England, he was gifted with an education which enabled him to return home to eventually study for his doctorate.⁶

Moltmann suggests that forgiveness is not so much about the guilt itself, but rather ‘the new life to which [God] desires to awaken the guilty.’⁷ At the same time, this freedom from guilt is only one side of forgiveness. Moltmann asks, ‘how can we be free, not only of the evil we have committed, but of the evil we have

suffered, and cannot forget because it has left traces in body and soul?⁸ In many ways, this freedom from the effects of experiencing evil is what is gained for those who need to forgive the perpetrator, instead of being bound up in hatred, anger, or bitterness about what has been. Forgiveness frees the individuals from their past in order to build a new future.

For those who perpetrate evil, Moltmann sees a need for atonement, although he acknowledges that this is often insufficient for the sin that has been committed.⁹ Connected to this need for atonement is the concept of repentance or conversion. Moltmann argues that ‘in the Bible... repentance means ‘con-version’, an ‘about turn’. And this turn is a *turn to the future*.’¹⁰ Repentance also needs to look towards the future, although it acknowledges the past hurts. Thus new beginnings are needed not only for those who have been the victims of violence, but also for those who have instigated that violence; both groups need liberation from their situations in order to create a new and just existence.

Forgiveness from Those who are Hurt

Whilst only a small number of the advocates spoke of forgiveness, those who did had been challenged in their understandings of the concept by the actions of the refugees and asylum seekers. With advocates and refugees negotiating relationships across languages, cultures and religions, forgiveness was frequently needed because mistakes were made, some of which had the potential to offend each other. Frances related:

One of the good things about all these people is how forgiving they are when people like me make mistakes which can be quite embarrassing. I can’t give any examples now, but they’re just so forgiving. And because, I think, they can see that there’s mutual trust, and that you’re doing your best for them. It’s quite amazing.

Over time, small blunders can accumulate and threaten to destroy relationships, yet the willingness with which the advocates and refugees forgave each other for these difficul-



Elaine Ledgerwood’s PhD thesis in theology at Murdoch University explored the reflections of Christians who had supported trauma survivors and the theologies of Moltmann and Sölle. This article is based on a chapter of her thesis.

ties enabled trust and relationships to develop.

However, the concept of forgiveness was challenged on an interfaith level. Another advocate reflected on the differences in understanding of forgiveness between Christianity and Islam,¹¹ particularly with what this meant for humanity’s relationship with God. Some of the Muslim refugees and asylum seekers had an understanding of Islam which meant that they could not be forgiven, even for accidental transgressions. Rev’d Kathleen, reflecting on what she had learnt from Mahmud’s understanding of Islam, said:

There is no forgiveness in Islam, or not the Islam that he believed in. For instance, one Christmas time someone cooked well made rum-balls, put them in the fridge, didn’t label them and he accidentally took a bite. And a good Muslim, a clean person would not have anything to do with alcohol. ‘Well God knows it’s not your fault.’ ‘Well I’ll just have to work harder to be a good Muslim.’ ‘Don’t you have any understanding that God understands?’ ‘No, I’ll just have to work really hard.’ I’m not someone who enjoyed reading Paul, I’m not someone who is hugely into the sin and guilt and humans are so awful that we can’t do anything without God. I have a fairly high view of humanity, in spite of all this stuff, but it made me realise how much even so, even how much I just take an understanding of grace for granted.

According to Rev’d Kathleen’s understanding of Mahmud’s faith he did not believe in forgiveness from God and the expectation was one of having to earn God’s favour rather than being able to put a mistake behind him and move on.

It could easily be expected that such an

understanding would lead to reluctance to forgive other people. It has frequently been noted by theologians that one's image of God affects how one treats other people;¹² however, the same refugee who did not believe he could be forgiven for accidentally ingesting alcohol, sent a gift to the then Minister for Immigration on his release. Rev'd Kathleen related:

I understand politically wanting to make connections, but he was wanting to show forgiveness. So for someone who wasn't expecting to experience forgiveness from God, he was still willing to offer it.

Yet, for at least some Muslims, forgiveness is from other humans and needs to be asked from those whom one has hurt.¹³ To seek absolution from ordained ministry, or even God, risks creating cheap forgiveness that does not call the lives of offenders into account. On the other hand, other advocates also spoke of this willingness to offer forgiveness in spite of the depth of hurt. Caroline asked Jacob, a Christian refugee who had been tortured in his country of origin, what it meant to forgive the perpetrators of the torture:

He said forgiveness was handing things back to God and telling him to deal with that person because I couldn't do it... It was a real definition of forgiveness because you hadn't gone on wearing the hate. He admitted that he didn't know how he would cope if he came face to face with that person, but he just handed it over. [Caroline]

Even those who did not talk about forgiveness explored the connected issue of grace. Grace is an undeserved gift, so it could be argued that forgiveness is one of the greatest acts of grace. Certainly, whilst perpetrators can repent and make reparation, forgiveness itself is not of their making. There are no actions that can make one 'worthy' of forgiveness or force another to forgive, since it is about dealing with the past. Hence, to be offered forgiveness is a grace.

The advocates expressed grace as something which occurred on both sides of the relationship. Some spoke of the experiences of

grace from their own point of view; others reflected on what it meant in the stories shared with them by the asylum seekers. With the system being so harsh on the asylum seekers, moments of grace stood out:

That was the ruling, but Geoff Gallop was the Premier at the time, and there was a deputation went to Geoff Gallop and explained to him what the problem was. These people wanted to learn English, but they couldn't enrol in TAFE because they didn't have a Visa. And so he said, 'This isn't right, but I can't change the law, but they can go to TAFE, they're allowed to go to TAFE but they can't get an official certificate to say they've done the course.' So many, many of them did go to TAFE to learn English and it was sort of undercover in a way. [Barbara]

The importance of grace must be understood in the context of the harshness of the detention system, and why it had the potential to change people's understandings of their faith. For those who were in detention, the experience of having people who cared for them, although they were strangers, was challenging to their understanding of their faith. Sarah reflected:

One of the comments that one of the Muslims made was that they had to come to Australia and be cared for by Christians to understand what Islam is.

For this refugee this learning was about the difference between what is written in the Scriptures and what is actually practiced. His experiences of Christian supporters shed new light on his understanding of the writings of Islam.

Other advocates spoke of the grace they experienced from refugees, particularly when in many ways the advocates can be identified with the system which is causing the problems. One advocate spoke of visiting a refugee camp in Africa:

She [a refugee in the camp] said how can those white people call themselves Christians? I was very shocked at first. And afterwards I realised that she didn't say, 'How can you call yourselves Christians' because I was there [Rev'd Tom]

The grace for Rev'd Tom was that this

refugee woman was able to differentiate between his actions and the lack of actions of those in affluent countries which had left her suffering. For many of the advocates grace also meant seeing the goodness in people, particularly those whom society shuns. This perhaps connects to the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, which was a common motif in the advocate's theological reflections. Larry saw it as an explicit example of how Christians are called to behave towards those who are suffering. Betty affirmed:

There's always beauty in the human being. Even in the jail, there you can always find something beautiful, you can. You can always find compassion, I suppose. It's just a lot more difficult.

Rev'd Steve also explored this concept and related an incident when he was working in an African refugee camp. He had taken some aid to a woman, who had given him food in return, although it had represented her family's dinner. He described this incident of being ministered to by a woman in extreme poverty as an example of a 'life changing moment of grace.'

Grace was not only offered by the detainees, but also in many ways by the advocates themselves. It was the gift of a reciprocal relationship between the advocates and asylum seekers. Not only were the advocates working against the system to create a gift of a humane environment, but the asylum seekers were also working against the system in developing their relationships with the advocates.

You know, I can see what you're giving them, but what are they giving you? And I think they're giving me the great gift of trust. Where they've come from situations where all of them, I'd say, without exception are in situations where they haven't been able to trust anybody much and they've left their country, very often without telling anybody. And you know escaped literally against the law and against all sorts of obstacles, they don't trust anybody. [Frances]

Grace and forgiveness, as we have seen, were integral to the building and development of on-going relationships between the asylum seekers and advocates. The advocates who heard stories of the asylum seekers and refu-

gees offering forgiveness, found their faith challenged and in particular were forced to rethink how they viewed forgiveness in the Christian context.

Towards a Hopeful Theology of Forgiveness

Whilst both Moltmann and some of advocates talked about forgiveness in connection to hope, their nuances were significantly different. Moltmann explores hope as bringing new life to the guilty,¹⁴ whereas those of the advocates who explored issues of forgiveness did so without any need for the offender to recognise his or her guilt. Indeed, most of the anecdotes of asylum seekers forgiving those caught up in the system related to people who continued to be involved in the system and in a very public way continued to deny their guilt.

The concept of forgiving someone who does not recognise his or her guilt has the potential to be easily misused. This certainly could relate to the traditional concept of forgiveness, particularly in the light of what is often interpreted as the biblical injunction for limitless forgiveness.¹⁵ However, one must ask whether such an injunction really applies to people who are systematically victimised over an extended period. It is, therefore, the connection between forgiveness and reconciliation which may help illuminate how forgiveness is relevant to asylum seekers and refugees.

The connection between forgiveness and reconciliation is disputable. Some authors see the two as synonymous,¹⁶ whereas others explicitly deny any intrinsic link between the two concepts.¹⁷ However, in the case of the asylum seekers who forgave the guards or even their torturers in their home countries for their actions, no such reconciliation can take place because there is no continuing relationship. For the refugee who forgave the then Minister of Immigration, there was no personal relationship in the first place. Rather the Minister, who was far removed from the situation, continued to be responsible for his welfare and to be negligent

in this regard. To link reconciliation as a necessary part of forgiveness would by definition exclude such examples and therefore it is my argument that reconciliation can be part of forgiveness, but it does not need to be. Forgiveness is still able to occur even when there is no possibility of reconciliation. Perhaps then, it is more accurate to say that forgiveness is not synonymous with reconciliation, but rather opens the possibility for the latter to occur.

If reconciliation is excluded as a necessary part of a definition of forgiveness, the issue remains as to what forgiveness actually is. From a human point of view, the reflection of Jacob that forgiveness involves handing back the hurts to God has two strengths to it. Firstly it allows for dealing with hurts that are so deep that it is not humanly possible to forgive. Although the hurt and pain may continue to be ongoing from the incidents that call for forgiveness, it allows for a sense of closure for the victim, even if the perpetrator does not know about this. The need for 'closure' is often observed in our contemporary world,¹⁸ and perhaps this sense of 'handing over to God' is a healthier method of achieving this than minimising the pain or seeking revenge.

Secondly, 'handing over to God' acknowledges the role of God in forgiveness. This means that when the victim continues to struggle with the hurt and pain of past events, there is not also the added burden of guilt for feeling unable to forgive. Even with the best intentions, there are hurts that are so deep they continue to reverberate in lives and small events can trigger memories of those experiences.¹⁹ This, of course, does not mean the victim has not forgiven the perpetrator, but rather what the perpetrator has done inevitably remains part of their life experience. This ongoing effect is illustrated most clearly in the case of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a disorder with which many of the refugees and asylum seekers have to deal. There are times when small events can trigger overwhelming memories of traumatic events.²⁰ Whilst PTSD is an extreme example, it must be noted that flashbacks can occur with less

traumatic experiences. Forgiveness is therefore about not allowing such past experiences to continue to affect daily life, ideally for both the victim and perpetrator.

However, it must be noted that the connection between forgiveness and hope is both a theological and a pastoral issue. For those who have offered or accepted forgiveness, it means that the past no longer continues to alter the ways in which the oppressed person experience the world and can even bring healing to relationships and systems.²¹ As to those who accept forgiveness, remorse for the past should also mean a change of behaviour for the future. Linn *et al.* do not view forgiveness as a passive response to oppression, rather they argue that by working through the stages of grief, one can arrive at a position wherein positive action can be taken which changes the situation for both the victim and perpetrator. They suggest that it is through listening to the internal voice underlying the initial response one is able to identify what is truly desired and determine a positive action that can be taken to amend the situation.²²

Yet, for the asylum seekers, in most cases positive action led to further victimisation. An advocate cited examples where asylum seekers were specifically targeted because they had attempted to take positive action:

He had never been in the management unit, but then one day when he was trying to defend a friend who the guards were attacking and dragging him away, he said he's OK, he's going through a bit of a hard time, he was trying to be gentle with them. So they came back and took him and some others to the management unit.
[Gloria]

Under such circumstances, even Linns' radical definition of forgiveness does not seem to apply. Perhaps then, the offering of forgiveness is more to do with not allowing past hurts to continue to impact upon the present, particularly on relationships with other people. For many of the asylum seekers there was no possibility of mending the relationship as Linn suggest. However, without addressing the issues involved of power and control, in

the example given by Gloria, trauma can continue to affect other relationships and thus continue to reverberate through life.

Between Moltmann and the advocates, there seems to be two sides to the one coin. Moltmann talks about receiving forgiveness, which can be constructed in more traditional terms, whereas the advocates discuss the offering of forgiveness by the offended party. Although these concepts interact, they are not both necessarily present. Being forgiven does bring, as Moltmann points out, new life to the guilty. It calls forth a change in behaviour and, as traditional theology maintains, requires recognition of guilt.²³ Yet, for the offended party, forgiveness involves letting go of that which affects relationships, not only with the offended party, but also with other people. It is through this double action of forgiveness, given and received, that hope is generated on both sides for a new beginning, not only with God or the offended party, but also with humanity. Neither the victim nor the perpetrator needs to continue to play the roles into which they have been cast by past actions and therefore they are free to be truly themselves. Not every perpetrator will take up the offer of forgiveness, but those who do are able to recognise their past wrongs and restore relationships, if not with the victim, then certainly with others who have been or might have been affected by the on-going impact of the perpetrator's actions. Forgiveness offers both the hope and the possibility that life can be different to that which is experienced in the present. Thus the actions of the asylum seekers, as related by the advocates, not only demonstrate a model of forgiveness which connects with hope, but also this can be generalised into examining forgiveness for a variety of situations.

However, a further aspect still needs to be addressed and that is the question as to why there is the connection between hope and forgiveness. The connection is more than simply the offer of a new beginning for both the perpetrator and the victim. In a conversation that I had with a survivor of torture I raised the issue of the connection between these concepts

and the fact that Moltmann had not written about the links. The survivor differentiated between the two concepts, saying that forgiveness deals with the now whereas hope looks towards the future: when one is coping with the effects of torture, the now is what is important. This could well be a starting point for thinking about the connections. It is only through dealing with the now, that we can look towards the future; forgiveness aims to deal with past hurts and therefore enables the survivor to hope for the future.

Whilst this point is valid and useful, the connection between hope and forgiveness is more than a continuum. Whether or not it is recognised at the time, forgiveness is in itself an act of hope. This view of forgiveness recognises that even the perpetrator is the beloved of God and hence treats the perpetrator as such. It recognises in the perpetrator the potential to grow and change regardless of whether he/she does so for him/herself.

At the same time, forgiveness names the wrongs, which is a necessary step towards enacting the future reign of God. It is not so much about minimising past hurts as seeking to use those hurts creatively in order to generate a new future for all concerned. Naming the evils is a necessary part of the process. There are actions of humans that cannot simply be swept away; the torture experienced by many of the asylum seekers is one such example. Through naming events as evil, a victim is able to recognise that such events were in no way his/her fault. It also allows victims to take control of their reactions. However, forgiveness enables the humanity of the perpetrator to be recognised and by so doing reduces the risk of dehumanising them and seeking revenge. Revenge simply perpetuates the cycle of violence that can occur where one party does not recognise the other as fully human; forgiveness breaks this cycle and allows for a new beginning. Where a continuing relationship occurs, forgiveness enables the development of creative solutions which can change that relationship in order to create a new future for all concerned.

Forgiveness is essential to Christianity and it brings hope on both sides of the equation. Yet care must be taken that it does not become an obligation that is used to further abuse the hurt, but rather that it is part of the healing process. Being able to forgive can free both victim and perpetrator from the past

in order to recreate a new future. This does not necessarily mean the development of a relationship, particularly where one did not exist prior to the events requiring forgiveness. However, it does mean that although those events may inform the future, they no longer determine it.

NOTES

1. Databases searched were Proudest, Academic OneFile and Atla Religion Database
2. Most notably see Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch, 5th ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1967), and Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975).
- 3 Ethics approval was gained from Murdoch University to complete this study and all names referred to in this article are pseudonyms.
4. For example in Jürgen Moltmann, *The crucified God: The cross of Christ as the foundation and criticism of Christian theology*, trans. R. A. & Bowden Wilson, John (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1974), there are eight references to forgiveness all of which discuss forgiveness by God. Similar results are found in searching others of Moltmann's books.
5. Stephen R. Haynes, *Prospects for post-Holocaust theology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 109.
6. Jürgen Moltmann, *A broad place: An autobiography*, trans. Margaret Kohl, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 32ff
7. Jürgen Moltmann, *In the end, the beginning: The life of hope*, trans. Margaret Kohl, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 75.
8. *Ibid.*, 53.
9. Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a secular society: The public relevance of theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 187.
10. Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1980), 24.
11. When I refer to 'Islam' it is important to note that this really relates to Islam as the advocates related the refugees' understanding. Like most other religions, Islam has a wide variety of interpretations and no one can be considered the correct one. However, it must also be noted that many of the asylum seekers and refugees were fleeing from fundamen-

- alist Islam and therefore this would have colored their views on many of the concepts discussed.
12. Such as in Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 74
13. This concept was expressed to me by a Muslim refugee who moved from her homeland as a child.
14. Moltmann, *In the end*, 75
15. For example in J. K. Grider, 'Forgiveness,' in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 460. Also found in biblical passages such as Matthew 18:22 that speaks of forgiving 'seventy-seven times' i.e. a limitless number of times
16. For example, James Dallen, 'Forgiveness,' in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 406-7..
- 17 For example, B. H. Childs, 'Forgiveness,' in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 438-40.
18. I am reflecting here on the frequency with which on the news at the end of a court case a victim is interviewed and says 'this has brought closure, I can move on now' and I am personally questioning whether that sense of closure is more about having an official attribution of blame. As I am writing this, there were recently several news articles where these comments were made on the ABC Online (www.abc.net.au/news)
19. Harold I. Kaplan, Benjamin J. Sadock, and Jack A. Grebb, *Kaplan and Sadock's synopsis of psychiatry: Behavioral sciences, clinical psychiatry*, 7th ed. (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1994), 606
20. *Ibid.*, 608
21. Dennis Linn, Matthew Linn, and Sheila Fabricant Linn, *Don't forgive too soon: extending the two hands that heal* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 32
22. *Ibid.*, 43
23. Grider, 'Forgiveness'.

Republished with thanks from the *Australian eJournal of Theology*, vol.19, no.3, 2012.