FORGIVENESS, RECONCILIATION, AND JUSTICE[1]

A Christian Contribution to a More Peaceful Social Environments

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Introduction

It is not what the mainstream sociologists who followed in the footsteps of Karl
Marx, Max Weber, and Emil Durkheim were predicting over the past century or so, but it
happened. Instead of slowly withering away or lodging itself quietly into the privacy of
worshipers' hearts, religion has emerged as an important player on the national and
international scenes. It is too early to tell how permanent this resurgence of religion will
be. The processes of secularization may well continue, though not so much in the older
sense of the increasing loss of religious observance, but in the newer sense of the
diminishing influence of religion in contemporary societies. Be the fate of secularization
in the contemporary societies as it may, presently religion is well and alive on the public
scene, so much so that a collection of essays with the title *Religion, the Missing
Dimension of Statecraft* can become obligatory reading for diplomats in many countries,

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[1] This paper was originally given at J. F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and
at London School of Economics. I want to than audiences at both places for their helpful comments.

Western and non-Western, and that despite the fact that it bears all the marks of an initial effort to push at the boundaries of a discipline.[2]

In the public perception, the reassertion of religion as a political factor has not been for the good. It seems that gods have mainly terror on their mind, as the title of Mark Jurgensmeyer's book on the global rise of religious violence suggests.[3] In the Western cultural milieu the contemporary coupling of religion and violence feeds most decisively on the memories of the wars that plagued Europe from the 1560s to the 1650s and in which religion was "the burning motivation, the one that inspired fanatical devotion and the most vicious hatred."[4] It was these wars that contributed a great deal to the emergence of secularizing modernity. As Stephen Toulmin has argued in *Cosmopolis*, modernity did not emerge, as often claimed, simply as a result of its protagonists' endeavor to dispel the darkness of tradition and superstition with the light of philosophical and scientific reason. It is not accidental that Descartes "discovered" the one correct method to acquire knowledge in a time when "over much of the continent …, people had a fair chance of having their throats cut and their houses burned down by strangers who merely disliked their religion."[5] A new way of establishing truth "that was independent of, and neutral between, particular religious loyalties" seemed an attractive

[2] Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[3] *Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[4] Scott R. Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred. Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 2. See Ronald Asch, *The Thirty Years War. The Holy Roman Empire and Europe, 1618-48* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

[5] Steven Toulmin, *Cosmopolis. The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 17.

alternative to war fueled by dogmatic claims.[6] As was the case with their Enlightenment forebears, many of our contemporaries see in religion a pernicious social ill that needs to be treated rather than a medicine from which cure is expected. The resurgence of religion seems to go hand in hand with the resurgence of religiously legitimized violence. Hence it is necessary to weaken, neutralize, or eliminate religion as a factor in public life.

In this essay I want to contest the claim that the Christian faith, as one of the major world religions, predominantly fosters violence, and to argue, instead, that it should be seen as a contributor to more peaceful social environments. I will not argue that the Christian faith was not and is not often employed to foster violence. Obviously, such an argument cannot be plausibly made; not only have Christians committed atrocities and other lesser forms of violence but they have also drawn on religious beliefs to justify them.[7] Neither will I argue that the Christian faith has been historically less associated with violence than other major religions; I am not at all sure that this is the case. Rather, I will argue that at least when it comes to Christianity, *the cure against religiously induced or legitimized violence is not less religion, but, in a carefully qualified sense, more religion*. Put differently, the more we reduce Christian faith to vague religiosity or conceive of it as exclusively a private affair of individuals, the worse off we will be; and inversely, the more we nurture it as an ongoing tradition that by its intrinsic content shapes behavior and by the domain of its regulative reach touches public sphere, the

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[6] Toulmin, 70.

[7] For a survay see Gottfried Maron, "Frieden und Krieg. Ein Blick in die Theologie- und Kirchengeschichte," in: *Glaubenskriege in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, Ed. Peter Herrmann (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996), 17-35. See also Karlheinz Deschner, *Kriminalgeschichte des Christentums*, 6 Vol. (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rohwolt, 1986ff) and a response to his work H. R. Seeliger (ed.), *Kriminalizierung des Christentums? Karlheinz Deschners Kirchengeschichte auf dem Pruefstand* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1993).

better off we will be. "Thick" practice of the Christian faith will help reduce violence and shape a culture of peace.

I will first offer some general remarks on the relation between Christian faith and violence, and then, in the main body of the paper, attempt to show that at Christianity's heart, and not just at its margins, lie important resources for creating a culture of peace. Before I proceed, one comment about the focus of my exploration and two disclaimers are in place. First, the focus. I cannot offer here a perspective on the entire complex of issues that relate to the reassertion of religion as political factor on national and international scenes. For instance, I leave such crucial issues aside, like the question whether in international relations a shift has taken place toward religiously driven conflicts and, if so, what are the dynamics characteristic of security action on behalf of religion.[8] Instead of looking at religion as an object of securitization, I am exploring dimensions of the impact a particular religion—the Christian faith—should have upon the security action taken in defense of *any object* and upon the way in which relations between the parties after such action are negotiated.

And now the disclaimers. First, by concentrating on religious resources I am neither excluding other resources nor suggesting that they are less important. "Shared democracy," "interdependence," and "dense international organization network," for instance, are crucial, as Bruce Russett has argued,[9] echoing major themes of Kant's essay

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[8] See "In Defense of Religion: Sacred Referent objects for securitization,"

[9] Bruce Russett, "A neo-Kantian perspective: democracy, interdependence, and international organizations in building security communities," in: *Security Communities*. Eds. Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 368-394; see also Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace. Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

"Eternal Peace."[10] Second, by concentrating on the resources of the Christian faith I am not claiming that other religions are by nature violent or even that Christianity owns the comparative advantage. I merely want to argue, by exploring the religion I know best, that, contrary to the opinion of many academics, politicians, and of the general public religion can be associated with the very opposite of the violence-inducing passions.

1. Christian Faith and Violence

In the past, scholars have argued in a variety of ways that the Christian faith fosters violence. I will concentrate here only on two types of arguments that, in my opinion, go to the heart of the matter. Other arguments, such as the one based on the combination of divine omnipotence, omniscience, and implacable justice—the omnipotent God, who sees everything, wills the punishment of every transgression—will take care of themselves, if adequate response is given to the two kinds of arguments I address here.

The first type of argument claims that religions are by nature violent, and that the Christian faith, being a religion, is also by nature violent.[11] In his book *Prey into Hunter* Maurice Bloch has, for instance, argued that the "irreducible core of the ritual process"

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[10] Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*. Transl. Lewis White Beck (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957)

[11] Juergensmeyer's *Terror in the Mind of God* rests on such a belief. One central reason why violence has accompanied religion's renewed political presence, he argues, has to do with "the nature of religious imagination, which always has had the propensity to absolutize and to project images of cosmic war" (242). Of course, cosmic war is waged for the sake of peace, so that precisely as a phenomenon at whose core lies cosmic war "religion has been order restoring and life affirming" (159). But if it is not to be violent, religion cannot be left to itself; it "needs the temper of rationality and fair play that Enlightenment values give to civil society" (243).

involves "a marked element of violence or ... of [a] conquest ... of the here and now by the transcendental."[12] He explains,

> In the first part of the ritual the here and now is simply left behind by the move towards the transcendental. This initial movement represents the transcendental as supremely desirable and the here and now as of no value. The return is different. In the return the transcendental is not left behind but continues to be attached to those who made the initial move in its direction; its value is not negated. Secondly, the return to the here and now is really a conquest of the here and now by the transcendental.[13]

It is this violent return from the transcendental sphere, Bloch continues, that explains "the often-noted fact that religion so easily furnishes an idiom of expansionist violence to people in a whole range of societies, an idiom which, under certain circumstances, becomes a legitimation for actual violence."[14]

Let us assume that Bloch has analyzed the core of the ritual process correctly. The question still remains whether one should look at the core of the ritual process, stripped of the texture as well as of the larger context that a concrete religion gives it, in order to understand the relation of religions to violence. Here is a thought experiment. Imagine that the first part of the ritual—the leaving of the here and now by the move toward the transcendental—were understood by a religion as the death of the self to her own self-centered desires and as her entry into a transcendental space of harmonious peace. And suppose that the second part of the ritual consisted in the conquest of the here and now by

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[12] Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter. The Politics of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992), 4-5.

the transcendental precisely as understood in this peaceful way. If this were how the formal structure of ritual were filled in materially, would such a religion serve as "a legitimation of actual violence"? Would not the "conquest," if successful, be precisely the victory of "transcendental" peace over the violence of the here and now?

As you are most certainly aware, such a religion need not be imagined as hypothetically existing. For what I have asked you to imagine is precisely how the Christian faith understands itself.[15] It will foster violence in a way Bloch suggests only when its notion of the "transcendental" is stripped of its proper content and then infused with the values of the "here and now" around which the conflict rages. One could object that *any* conquest of the here and now by the transcendental involves violence. But if non-coercive victory of peace over violence is itself seen as implicated in violence, then one may well wonder whether the notion of violence has been hopelessly muddled.

Other scholars, like Regina Schwartz in her book *The Curse of Cain*, try to explain the Christian faith's complicity in violence by pointing not to the general features of the Christian faith as religion, but to one of its characteristic components. Along with Judaism and Islam, Christianity is a *monotheistic* religion, and therefore, Schwartz argues, an *exclusive* religion that divides people into "us," who know the one true God, and "them," who do not. Such monotheistic exclusivity, which imports the category of

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[13] Bloch, 5.
[14] Bloch, 6.
[15] Bloch engages the Christian faith directly, and envisages a possibility of it not underwriting violence. But in his account such a possibility is predicated on a "refusal of the second phase of rebounding violence, that is, a refusal of the conquest of external vitality which is therefore ultimately a refusal to continue with earthly life" (pp. 90-91). St. Paul's Christianity, he believes, is an example of such a refusal—or rather, an example of a half-hearted refusal since, Paul also undertook "prudent organization of a well-organized church firmly embedded in the continuing practical and political world" (94). On my reading, St. Paul's Christianity is not an example of refusal of conquest of the here and now, but of the kind of conquest for which non-violence is constitutive; communities of faith were meant to instantiate precisely such conquest.

universal "truth" into the religious sphere, is bound to have a violent legacy, the argument goes.[16] "We," the faithful, have on our side the true God who is against "them," the infidels and renegades.[17]

But is the divine oneness necessarily violent? Is *any* notion of divine oneness violent? Does not, for instance, universalism, which is implied by divine oneness, work also *against* the tendency to divide people into "us" and "them"? More significantly, would not a pressure be exerted against self-enclosed and exclusive identities if the monotheism in question were of a Trinitarian kind?[18] Let me explicate this last rhetorical question.[19] One of the socially most important aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity concerns the conceptualization of identities. To believe that the one God is the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, is to believe that the identity of the "Father" cannot be understood apart from the "Son" and the "Spirit." To be the divine "Father" is from the start to have one's identity defined by another and therefore not to be undifferentiated and self-enclosed. Moreover, the divine persons as non-self-enclosed identities are understood by Christians to form a perfect communion of love; the persons give themselves to each other and receive themselves from each other in love. It would be difficult, so it seems to me, to argue that *such* monotheism fosters violence. Instead, in Bloch's terminology, it grounds peace here and now in the transcendental peacefulness of the divine being. The

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[16] Jakov Jukic sees the heart of monotheism's exclusivity precisely in the insertion of the question of truth into the religious domain which the belief in the one God inescapably makes. To believe in one God means to believe in one *true* God. The claim to truth in religious domain has immediate consequence in the public realm (*Lica i Maske Svetoga. Ogledi iz drustvene religiologije* [Zagreb: Krscanska sadasnjost, 1997, 242f).

[17] Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[18] For a critique of Schwartz along these lines see Miroslav Volf, "Jehovah on Trial," *Christianity Today* (April 27, 1998), 32-35.

[19] For the following see Miroslav Volf, "'Trinity is Our Social Program'. [?].

argument for inherent violence of monotheism works only if one reduces the thick religious description of God to naked oneness and then postulates such abstract oneness to be of decisive social significance.

Again, my point is not that the Christian faith has not been used to legitimize violence, or that there are no elements in the Christian faith on which such misuses build. It is rather that at the heart the Christian faith is peace creating and peace sustaining so that such misuse is less likely to happen when people have deep and informed commitments to the faith, commitments with robust cognitive and moral content—at least when these commitments stem from historic Christian beliefs rather than being recast arbitrarily by leaders of short-lived and oppressive communities. Strip religious commitments of all cognitive and moral content and reduce faith to a cultural resource endowed with a diffuse aura of the sacred, and you are likely to get religiously inspired or legitimized violence. Nurture people in the tradition and educate them about it, and if you get militants, they will be militants for peace. As R. Scott Appelby argued recently in his book *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, contrary to the misconception popular in some academic and political circles, religious people play a positive role in the world of human conflicts and contribute to peace not when they "moderate their religion or marginalize their deeply held, vividly symbolized, and often highly particular beliefs," but rather "when they remain *religious* actors."[20]

There are two main ways in which religions contribute to the violence between the conflicting parties: (1) by assuring the combatants of the (absolute) rightness of their

[20] Appleby, 16.

cause and the correlative (absolute) evil of their enemies[21] and (2) by sacralizing

communal identity of one party and correlative demonizing of others.[22] In hope of

showing that the Christian faith puts pressure on its mature and informed practitioners not

to act out of persuasion in the absolute rightness of their cause, I will explore the nexus of

issues around the questions of forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice which lie at the

heart of what this faith is about. As the example of South Africa with its "Truth and

Reconciliation Commission" paradigmatically attests, these issues are particularly

relevant to the post-conflict situations. An argument similar to the one I make here about

religion and absolute rightness of one party in conflict could be made in relation to

sacralization of communal identities, though I will not pursue that argument here.[23]

In the following I will first discard two wrongheaded ways to relate forgiveness,

reconciliation, and justice, and then argue for an alternative.

2. Cheap Reconciliation

The first wrongheaded way to relate justice to forgiveness and reconciliation goes

under the name of "cheap reconciliation." It attained prominence in theological circles

through the *Kairos Document*, written by theologians critical of the South African regime

before the dismantling of apartheid. They coined the term in analogy to the notion of

"cheap grace"—which designates the readiness to receive love from God with no sense

of obligation toward one's neighbors. Significantly, the term "cheap grace" was coined

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[21] So, for instance, Juergensmeyer, 242.

[22] So, for example, Sells, *Bridge Betrayed*.

[23] See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian who for religious reasons participated in the resistance against the Nazi regime.[24] The drafters of the *Kairos Document* set up the context for understanding what they mean by "cheap reconciliation" as follows:

> In our situation in South Africa today it would be totally unchristian to plead for reconciliation and peace before the present injustices have been removed. Any such plea plays into the hands of the oppressor by trying to persuade those of us who are oppressed to accept our oppression and to become reconciled to the intolerable crimes that are committed against us. That is not Christian reconciliation, it is sin. It is asking us to become accomplices in our own oppression, to become servants of the devil. No reconciliation is possible in South Africa without justice.[25]

As I will argue shortly, I am not persuaded that reconciliation should be pursued only *after* the injustices have been removed but rather believe that struggle against injustices is part of the more fundamental pursuit of reconciliation. But if we put this temporal sequencing of justice and reconciliation aside for a moment, the critique of cheap reconciliation that emerges from the text is clear. Cheap reconciliation sets "justice" and "peace" against each other as alternatives. To pursue cheap reconciliation means to give up on the struggle for freedom, to renounce the pursuit of justice, to put up with oppression.

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[24] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan, 1963 [1937]), 45-47, 59.

[25] *The Kairos Document. Challenge to the Church. A theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa.* (Braamfontein: Skotaville Publishers/Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1986), Art 3.1.

If I am not mistaken, some such usage of the term "reconciliation" predominates in public discourse today. One speaks of "national reconciliation" and expects from it "collective healing" and greater "political unity" or fears that behind it lurk organic notions of the social "body" and the centralization of power. Stripped of its moral content, reconciliation is contrasted so starkly with "justice" that one has to weigh the relative values of "justice" and "unity" in order to assess to what extent the sacrifice of justice can be morally acceptable and politically desirable in order to achieve political unity.

To advocate cheap reconciliation clearly means to betray those who suffer injustice, deception, and violence. Though the Christian faith has been all too often employed to advocate such reconciliation—indeed, the *Kairos Document* as a critique of "cheap reconciliation" was directed against theology of the pro-apartheid churches—such a concept of reconciliation really amounts to a betrayal of the Christian faith. It is almost universally recognized by theologians and church leaders today that the prophetic denunciation of injustice has a prominent place in the Christian faith. This prophetic strand cannot be removed without gravely distorting Christianity. The struggle against injustice is inscribed in the very character of the Christian faith. Hence an adequate notion of reconciliation must include justice as its constitutive element. And yet it is precisely here that watchfulness is needed. For the imperative of justice, severed from the overarching framework of grace within which it is properly situated and from the obligation to non-violence, underlies much of the Christian faith's misuse for religiously legitimizing violence.

In the context of cheap reconciliation, forgiveness is best described as acting toward the perpetrator "as if their sin were not there."[26] The offense has happened—or one party thinks that it has happened—but the injured party treats the offender as if it had not. At the popular level, one is told simply to shrug one's shoulders and say, "Oh, never mind." This "never mind" exculpates the offender even from "moral reproach."

In *The Genealogy of Morals* Friedrich Nietzsche advocated a version of "as-if-not" attitude toward transgression. He suggested it in the context of the opposition between "slave morality" and "noble morality." The first, which operates along the axis of "good-evil," is reactive in the sense that it is shaped by the situation with respect to which it defines human conduct; the second is purely positive, existing in sovereign disregard of the situation. In the process of this distinction, Nietzsche advocates an attitude toward transgression untouched by concerns for justice as desert. He writes,

> To be unable to take his enemies, his misfortunes and even his *misdeeds* seriously for long - that is the sign of strong, rounded natures with superabundance of a power which is flexible, formative, healing and can make one forget (a good example from the modern world is Mirabeou, who had no recall for the insult and slights directed at him and who would not forgive, simply because he - forgot.) A man like this shakes from him, with one shrug, many worms which would have burrowed into another man; here and here alone is it possible, assuming that this is possible at all on earth - truly to 'love your neighbour.[27]

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[26] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 411.

[27] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Genealogy of Morals*. Transl. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 23-24; Part 1, Section 10.

Such sovereign disregard for injuries from others demands extraordinary strength, almost

that of an *Uebermensch* and a person with sensibilities nurtured by the culture of late

modernity may be tempted to reject Nietzsche's proposal simply on that count. This,

however, may be less an argument against Nietzsche than against the weakness of the

victims of offenses. At least for those who, unlike Nietzsche, think that moral concerns

are legitimate, the crucial question is whether the "as-if-not" attitude toward transgression

is morally acceptable. The answer is arguably "No." It is morally wrong to treat a

murderer "as if" he had not committed the murder—or at least it is wrong to do so until

some important things have happened, for example, until the murder has been named as

murder and the murderer has distanced himself from the deed. One may also suggest that

disregard for justice as desert entails the abdication of responsibility for the

transformation of the perpetrator and the world at large. For it is hard to imagine how one

could induce offenders to change without at least implicitly morally reproaching their

deeds.

Significantly, Nietzsche himself never described the "as-if-not" attitude as

forgiveness. Mirabeau, his example of the "virtuous," *could not forgive* because he had

forgotten! Because forgiveness is conceptually tied to justice as desert, Nietzsche had

little positive to say about it and tended to replace it with "forgetting."[28] Nietsche rejected

forgiveness precisely because he saw rightly its positive relation to justice. Forgiveness is

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[28] See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil. Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Transl. Marion Faber (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 110, Aphorism 217. In *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche argued for the impossibility of forgiveness by tying it to (1) the knowledge of the evil-doer about what he or she is doing and (2) to the right of the offended or of the third party "to accuse and to punish." Since the evil-doer can never fully know what he or she is doing and since we do not have the right to accuse and to punish, Nietzsche argued, forgiveness is impossible. So clearly, for Nietzsche forgiveness presupposes the framework of justice.

more than just "the overcoming of anger and resentment."[29] It always entails foregoing a

rightful claim against someone who has in some way harmed or offended us. Such a

foregoing of a rightful claim makes forgiveness unjust and precisely thereby prevents

forgiveness to fall outside of concern for justice.

The concern for justice is integral to forgiveness and reconciliation. But what is

the precise relation between justice on the one hand and forgiveness and reconciliation on

the other?

3. First Justice, Then Reconciliation

One way of relating positively justice to reconciliation is to suggest that the

process of reconciliation can begin only *after* injustice has been removed. This, as I noted

earlier, seems to be the position of the *Kairos Document*, which so rightly denounced

"cheap reconciliation." But is this "first justice, then reconciliation" stance plausible?

There are major problems with it.

First and most fundamentally, the "first justice, then reconciliation" stance is

impossible to carry out. All accounts of what is "just" are to some extent relative to a

particular person or group and are invariably contested by that person's or group's rivals.

In any conflict with prolonged history, each party sees itself as the victim and perceives

its rival as the perpetrator, and has *good reasons for reading the situation that way*.

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[29] So Jeffrie G. Murphy, "Forgiveness and Resentment," *Forgiveness and Mercy*, ed. Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 14-34, 24. Pamela Hieronymi's response to a prevalent claim that forgiveness is primarily a matter of manipulating oneself out of resentment is to the point: "Ridding one's self of resentment by taking a specially-designed pill, for example, would not count as forgiveness" ("Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* [forthcoming], 2).

Even more significantly, as Nietzsche rightly noted in *Human, All Too Human*, given the nature of human interaction, every pursuit of justice not only rests on partial injustice but also creates new injustices.[30] In an ongoing relationship, as the temporal and spatial contexts of an offense are broadened to give an adequate account of it, it becomes clear that any action we undertake now is inescapably ambiguous, at best partially just and therefore partially unjust. No peace is possible within the overarching framework of strict justice for the simple reason that no strict justice is possible. Hence the demand at communal or political levels is often is often not for "justice" but for "as much justice as possible." But the trouble is that, within the overarching framework of strict justice, enough of justice never gets done because more justice is always possible than in fact gets done.

Second, even if strict justice were possible, it is questionable whether it would be desirable. Most of us today feel that the legal provisions of the Hebrew Bible which insist that the punishment be commensurate with the crime are excessive. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" strikes us as too severe. Originally, of course, the provision was meant to restrict the excesses of vengeance. And yet it is precisely the demand for more than equal retribution that is strictly just. If a person's tooth is broken in retribution for her breaking of mine, we are *not* even for the simple reason that the situation of offense is manifestly not one of exchange. In a situation of exchange, both of us would have disposal over our teeth, and I would give you mine under condition that you give me yours. But in a situation of offense, the consent to the exchange is lacking. By breaking

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[30] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human. A Book for Free Spirits* (transl. Marion Faber; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 216. For a related but different critique of justice see Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of*

my tooth you have violated me, and therefore you deserve greater punishment than just the equal breaking of your tooth. Most of us, however, don't think that a world in which corrective justice was pursued even with strictness as the principle "tooth for a tooth" demands would be a desirable one; and so, even when we demand "justice," we are in fact after something much less than strict justice, which is to say that we are ready tacitly to "forgive" part of the offense. We are at least implicitly aware that the normal functioning of human life is impossible without grace.

Third, even if justice could be satisfied, the conflicting parties would continue to be at odds with one another. The enforcement of justice would rectify past wrongs but it would not create communion between victims and perpetrators. Yet some form of communion—some form of positive relationship—needs to be established if the victim and perpetrator are to be fully healed. Consider the fact that personal and group identities are not defined simply from within an individual or a group, apart from relationships with their near and distant neighbors. We are who we are not simply as autonomous and self-constituting entities but essentially also as related and other-determined. I, Miroslav Volf, am who I am not simply because I am distinct from all other individuals but in part also because over past 2 years, for instance, I have been shaped by interaction with my son, Nathanael. Similarly, to be a Serb today *is* in part to have Albanians as one's neighbors and Kosovars as a minority within one's borders, to be a citizen of a country that waged wars against Bosnia and Croatia and was bombed by NATO. If we are in part who we are because we are embedded in a nexus of relations which make others to be part of ourselves, then we cannot be properly healed without our relationships being healed too.

Justice, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 24-26.

The pursuit of justice, even if *per impossibile* fully successful, would satisfy our sense of what is right, but would not heal us. It would bring us peace only as the absence of war, but not as harmonious ordering of differences.

The "first justice, then reconciliation" stance implies that forgiveness should be offered only after the demands of justice have been satisfied. Forgiveness here means no more than the refusal to allow an adequately redressed wrongdoing to continue to qualify negatively one's relationship with the wrongdoer.

Strange as it may seem, forgiveness *after* justice is not much different from forgiveness *outside* justice. Forgiveness outside justice means, you will recall, treating the offender as if he had not committed the offense. Forgiveness after justice means doing the same—only that the demand that justice be satisfied before forgiveness can be given is meant to redress the situation so that one can *rightly* treat the wrongdoer as if he had not committed the deed. Whereas in the first case forgiveness is the stance of a heroic individual who is "strong" and "noble" enough to be unconcerned with the offense, in the second case forgiveness is the stance of a strictly moral individual who shows enough integrity that after the injustice has been redressed he or she refuses to feel and act vindictively. To forgive outside justice is to make no moral demands; to forgive after justice is not to be vindictive. In both cases it is to treat the offender as if he had not committed the offense or as if it were not his.

The first and decisive argument that I brought against the "first justice, then reconciliation" stance applies to this notion of forgiveness too. If justice is impossible, as I have argued, then forgiveness could never take place. There is another important argument against this notion of forgiveness. If forgiveness were properly given only after

strict justice has been established, then one would *not* be going beyond one's duty in offering forgiveness; one would indeed *wrong* the original wrongdoer if one did not offer forgiveness. "The wrong has been fully redressed," an offender could complain if forgiveness were not forthcoming, "and hence you owe me forgiveness." But this is not how we understand forgiveness. It is a *gift* that the wronged gives to the wrongdoer. If we forgive we are considered magnanimous; if we refuse to forgive, we may be insufficiently virtuous—for, as Robert Adams argues, "we ought in general be treated better than we deserve"[31]—but do not wrong the other.

We need to look for an alternative both to forgiveness and reconciliation outside of justice and to forgiveness and reconciliation after justice. I want to suggest that such notions of forgiveness and reconciliation are to be found at the heart of the Christian faith—in the narrative of the cross of Christ, which reveals the very character of the God. On the cross, God is manifest as the God who, though in no way indifferent toward the distinction between good and evil, nonetheless lets the sun shine on both the good and the evil (cf. Matthew 5:45); as the God of indiscriminate love who died for the ungodly to bring them into the divine communion (cf. Romans 5:8), the God who offers grace—not cheap grace, but grace nonetheless—to the vilest evildoer.

4. Will to Embrace, Actual Embrace

So what is the relationship between reconciliation and justice that is inscribed in the very heart of the Christian faith? Partly to keep things rhetorically simpler, I will substitute the more poetic "embrace" for "peace" as the terminal point of the

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[31] Robert M. Adams, "Involuntary Sins," *The Philosophical Review*, 104 (1985), 24.

reconciliation process as I explore this issue in the reminder of my text. The Christian tradition can be plausibly construed to make four central claims about the relation between justice and embrace.

4.1. The Primacy of the Will to Embrace

The starting point is the primacy of the will to embrace the other, even the offender. Since the God Christians worship is the God of unconditional and indiscriminate love the will to embrace the other is the most fundamental obligation of Christians. The claim is radical, and precisely in its radicality, so socially significant. The will to give ourselves to others and to welcome them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity. The will to embrace precedes any "truth" about others and any reading of their action with respect to justice. This will is absolutely indiscriminate and strictly immutable; it transcends the moral mapping of the social world into "good" and "evil."

The primacy of the will to embrace is sustained negatively by some important insights into the nature of the human predicament. Since the Christian tradition sees all people as marred by evil and since it conceives of evil not just as act but as a power that transcends individual actors, it rejects the construction of the world around exclusive moral polarities—here, on our side, "the just, the pure, the innocent," and there, on the other side, "the unjust, the defiled, the guilty." Such a world does not exist. If our search for peace is predicated on its existence, in its factual absence we will be prone to make the mistake of refusing to read conflicts in moral terms and thus lazily fall back on either establishing symmetries in guilt or proclaiming all actors as irrational. Instead of

conceiving of our search for peace as a struggle on behalf of "the just, the pure, the innocent," we should understand it as an endeavor to transform the world in which justice and injustice, innocence and guilt, crisscross and intersect, and we should do so guided by the recognition that the economy of undeserved grace has primacy over the economy of moral desert.

4.2. Attending to Justice as A Precondition of Actual Embrace

Notice that I have described the will to embrace as unconditional and indiscriminate, but not the embrace itself. A genuine embrace, an embrace that neither play-acts acceptance nor crushes the other, cannot take place until justice is attended to. Hence the will to embrace includes in itself the will to determine what is just and to name wrong as wrong. The will to embrace includes the will to rectify the wrongs that have been done, and it includes the will to reshape the relationships to correspond to justice. And yet, though an actual embrace requires attending to justice, it does not require establishment of strict justice. Indeed, the pursuit of embrace is precisely an alternative to constructing social relations around strict justice. It is a way of creating a genuine and deeply human community of harmonious peace in an imperfect world of inescapable injustice.[32] Without the grace of embrace, humane life in our world in which evil is inescapably committed but our deeds are irreversible would be impossible.[33]

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[32] Robert Burt, "Reconciliation with Injustice," *Transgression, Punishment, Responsibility, Forgiveness. Studies in Culture, Law and the Sacred* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Law School, 1998), 106-122 (=*Graven Images* 4 [1998]).

[33] On the need for forgiveness against the backdrop of the irreversibility of deeds see Hanah Arendt, *The Human Condition. A Study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), 212f.

4.3. Will to Embrace as Framework for the Search for Justice

To emphasize the will to embrace means more than to advocate learning how to live with inescapable injustice while not giving up on the pursuit of justice. For the will to embrace is also a precondition of (even tenuous) convergences and agreements on what is just in a world of strife. Without the will to embrace, each party will insist on the justness of their own cause, and strife will continue. For, given the nature of human beings and their interaction, there is too much injustice in an uncompromising struggle for justice.

The will to embrace—love—sheds the light of knowledge by the fire it carries with it. Our eyes need the light of this fire to perceive any justice in the causes and actions of our enemies. Granted, our enemies may prove to be as unjust as they seem, and what they insist is just may in fact be a perversion of justice. But if there is any justice in their causes and actions, only the will to embrace will make us capable of perceiving it, because it will let us see both them and ourselves with their eyes. Similarly, the will to exclude—hatred—blinds by the fire it carries with it. The fire of exclusion directs its light only on the injustice of others; any justness they may have is enveloped in darkness or branded as covert injustice—a merely contrived goodness that makes their evil all the more deadly. Both the "clenched fist" and the "open arms" are epistemic stances; they are moral conditions of adequate moral perception. The clenched fist hinders the perception of the possible justness of our opponents and thereby reinforces injustice; the open arms help detect any justness that may hide behind what seems to be the manifest injustness of

our opponents and thereby reinforces justice. To agree on justice in situations of conflict you must want more than justice; you must want embrace.

4.4. Embrace as the Horizon of the Struggle for Justice

As in many of our activities, in the struggle for justice much depends on the *telos* of the struggle. Toward what is the struggle oriented? Is it oriented simply toward ensuring that everyone gets what they deserve? Or is it oriented toward the larger goal of healing relationships? I think the later is the case. Hence the embrace should be the *telos* of the struggle for justice. If not, reconciliation will not even be attempted until the "right" side has won. And unless reconciliation is the horizon of the struggle for justice from the outset, it is not clear why reconciliation should even be attempted after the victory of the "right" side has been achieved.

Pulling all four features of the relation between reconciliation and justice together we can say that reconciliation, describes primarily a process whose goal is the creation of a community in which each recognizes and is recognized by all and in which all mutually give themselves to each other in love. As such, the concept of reconciliation stands in opposition to any notion of self-enclosed totality predicated on various forms of exclusion. And far from standing in contrast to justice, for such a notion of reconciliation justice is an integral element. Though reconciliation may be seen from one angle to issues *ultimately* in a state "beyond justice," it does so precisely by attending to justice rather than by circumventing it.

5. Forgiveness and the Primacy of Embrace

Forgiveness can be properly understood and practiced only in the context of the stance which gives primacy to reconciliation but does not give up the pursuit of justice. So what is the relation between forgiveness and justice?

First, forgiveness does not stand outside of justice. To the contrary, forgiveness is possible only against the backdrop of a tacit affirmation of justice. Forgiveness always entails blame. Anyone who has been forgiven for what she has *not* done will attest to that. Forgiveness should therefore not be confused with acceptance of the other. Acceptance is a purely positive concept; any notion of negation is foreign to it, except, obviously, that it implies negation of non-acceptance. But negation is constitutive of forgiveness. To offer forgiveness is at the same time to condemn the deed and accuse the doer; to receive forgiveness is at the same time to admit to the deed and accept the blame.[34]

Second, forgiveness presupposes that justice—full justice in the strict sense of the term—has not been done. If justice were fully done, forgiveness would not be necessary, except in the limited and inadequate sense of not being vindictive; justice itself would have fully repaid for the wrongdoing. Forgiveness is necessary because strict justice is not done and strictly speaking cannot be done.

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[34] It is important to note that human forgiveness cannot remove guilt. As Nicolai Hartmann rightly pointed out in his *Ethics*, human forgiveness is "a moral act on the part of him who forgives and solely concerns his conduct toward the guilty… Forgiveness may very well take from the guilt that special *sting of guilt* which inheres in the deserved contempt and hostility of the man who has been wronged; and it may give back to the guilty the outward peace which he had spurned; but it can never remove the moral guilt itself" (Nicolai Hartmann, *Ethics III. Moral Freedom*, transl. Stanton Coit [London: George Allen & Unwin, 1932], 271-272—italics added). Only divine forgiveness actually removes guilt. When human beings forgive they (1) forego resentment, (2) refuse to press the claims of justice against the other and therefore also (3) bear the cost of the wrongdoing . As a result of human forgiveness, the guilty *is treated* as if he or she were not guilty (to be distinguished from *defining* forgiveness itself as treating the other as if he or she had not committed the offense). But unless forgiven by God, he or she remains guilty, human forgiveness notwithstanding.

Third, forgiveness entails not only the affirmation of the claims of justice but also their transcendence. More precisely, by forgiving we affirm the claims of justice in the very act of not letting them count against the one whom we forgive. By stating that the claims of justice need not be (fully) satisfied, the person who forgives indirectly underscores the fact that what the sense of justice claims to be a wrongdoing is indeed a wrongdoing.

Fourth, since it consists in forgoing the affirmed claims of justice, forgiveness, like any instantiation of grace, involves self-denial and risk. One has let go of something one had a right to, and one is not fully certain whether one's magnanimity will bear fruit either in one's inner peace or in a restored relationship. Yet forgiveness is also laden with promise. Forgiveness is the context in which wrongdoers can come to the recognition of their own injustice. To accuse wrongdoers by simply insisting on strict justice is to drive them down the path of self-justification and denial before others and before themselves. To accuse wrongdoers by offering forgiveness is to invite them to self-knowledge and release. Such an invitation has a potential of leading the wrongdoer to admit guilt and to repent, and thereby healing not only wrongdoers but also those who have been wronged by them.

Fifth, the *first step* in the process of forgiveness is unconditional. It is not predicated on repentance on the part of the wrongdoer or on her willingness to redress the wrong committed. Yet, full-fledged and completed forgiveness, is not unconditional. It is true that repentance—the recognition that the deed committed was evil coupled with the willingness to mend one's ways—is not so much a prerequisite of forgiveness as, more profoundly, its possible result. Yet repentance is the kind of result of forgiveness whose

absence would amount to a refusal to see oneself as guilty and therefore a refusal to receive forgiveness as forgiveness. Hence an unrepentant wrongdoer must in the end remain an unforgiven wrongdoer—the unconditionality of the first step in the process of forgiveness notwithstanding.

Finally, forgiveness is best received if in addition to repentance there takes place some form of restitution. Indeed, one may ask whether the repentance is genuine if the wrongdoer refuses to restore something of what she has taken away by the wrongdoing—provided that she is capable of doing so.

In sum, forgiveness is an element in the process of reconciliation, a process in which the search for justice is an integral and yet subordinate element.

Conclusion

In the later part of this essay I sought to explicate the social significance of the foundational act of the Christian faith—the death of Christ. This step from the narrative of what God has done for humanity on the cross of Christ to the account of what human beings ought to do in relation to one another was often left unmade in the history of Christianity. The logic of God's action, it was sometimes argued, was applicable to the inner world of human souls plagued by guilt and shame; they outer relationships in family, economy, and state ought to be governed by another logic, more worldly logic. At least in Protestantism, this disjunction between the inner and outer was one important reason why the Christian faith could be misused to legitimize violence. [35] Emptied of

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[35] See, for instance, Paul Tillich, *Against the Third Reich. Paul Tillich's wartime addresses to Nazi Germany* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

their social import, religious symbols nonetheless floated loosely in the social world and could be harnessed to purposes that are at adds with their proper content. Significantly, this disjunction is never to be found in the New Testament; instead, the central religious narratives and rituals are intended to shape all domains of early Christian's lives. Arguably, the central Christian rituals, Baptism and Eucharist, enact the narrative of divine action precisely as the pattern for lives of believers.

It may well be the case, someone may respond, that the Christian faith at its heart fosters peace rather than violence. But in what ways can it do so in concrete social and political settings? First, the narrative of divine action can motivate and shape behavior of individual actors in conflict situations. Depending on their position, such individual actors can be significant and even decisive for the future of conflicts.[36] Second, this narrative can shape broader cultural habits and expectations that make peaceful solutions possible. It takes a particular cultural soil for the seed of peace to bear fruit. Of course, the narratival portrayal of the divine redemptive action cannot be simply mirrored in human interaction, be that on individual, communal, or political planes. Instead, one has to aim at culturally and situationally appropriate practical analogies as near or distant echoes of the divine redemptive action that lies at the heart of the Christian faith.

Finally, the narrative of divine action as it applies to human interaction can help shape social institutions. One way to think about how this may be the case is to recall the concluding words of Anthony Giddens' book *Modernity and Self-Identity*. After noting the emergence in the high modernity of what he calls "life politics" (as distinct from "emancipatory politics") which demands a remoralization of social life, he writes

How can we remoralize social life without falling prey to prejudices? The more

we return to existential issues, the more we find moral disagreements; how can

these be reconciled? If there are no transhistorical moral principles, how can

humanity cope with clashes of 'true believers' without violence? Responding to

such problems will surely require a major reconstruction of emancipatory politics

as well as the pursuit of the life-political endeavors.[37]

The narrative of the God of unconditional love who reconciles humanity without

condoning injustice along with its intended patterning in the lives of human beings and

communities, contains, I suggest, at least some resources for such a reconstruction of

politics.

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[36] See *Religion*,

[37] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 231.