Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Paradise Lost or Pragmatism?

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"Amongst men, forgiveness can only mean: to give up vengeance, to keep quiet and do as if nothing happened, which means: to walk away by principle, while vengeance will always remain with the other and does not put an end to the relationship. … Reconciliation, on the other hand, originates in the acceptance of what befalls us. … Whoever reconciles with the other just accepts to carry on his shoulder the burden that, anyhow, weighs on the other. This means that it re-establishes equality. This is why reconciliation is the exact opposite of forgiveness which establishes inequality." (Hannah Arendt cited in Maggiori, 2005, section entitled *Un ange passé,* para. 2).

In the past decade there has been an increasing focus on forgiveness and reconciliation in societies coming out of conflict. The concepts were previously the domain of philosophers and theologians but have become integrally linked to questions of political transition. Hayner (2001) pointed out, specifically with debates about truth commissions, that there has been a shift from focusing on the investigative aspects of the truth-telling process and cataloging human rights abuses to considering their social impact. Issues such as healing, reconciliation, apology, acknowledgment, and forgiveness (to a lesser degree) have become central to the transitional justice debate.

Consequently, as the articles in this issue indicate, the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation have fallen under the academic microscope. That said, the articles also demonstrate that dealing with and trying to understand the social, political, and psychological relevance of forgiveness and reconciliation in societies coming out of conflict is a complex and difficult subject that raises many questions. This brief response to the articles in this issue addresses four such questions: (a) Why are questions of forgiveness and reconciliation being posed now in political transition processes? (b) Is intergroup forgiveness possible? (c) How do recon-

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ciliation and forgiveness relate to each other? (d) At the macro political level, is there a place for forgiveness and reconciliation in the *realpolitik* of political transitions?

FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION: WHY NOW?

In the past decade the notions of reconciliation and forgiveness have become central to the transitional justice debate. Some authors have spoken about the second millennium as marked by attempts to face past abuses (Henderson, 2002). Henderson went as far as arguing that 1998 was the "Year of Loving Dangerously" with a catalogue of Mandela-like attitudes and actions taking place. This year saw, among others, the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission release its first reports, Prime Minister Blair apologize for the Irish Famine, the start of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry in Northern Ireland, former U.S. President Clinton apologize for the African slave trade, and the Pope apologize to Jews for the failure of the Catholic Church to stand up to Nazism in World War II (Henderson, 2002). Kadiangandu and Mullet (this issue) outline other examples of acts of reconciliation, forgiveness, and apology at the political level.

However, 1998 was also the year that the Real IRA, a breakaway faction of the Provisional IRA opposed to the Northern Ireland Peace Agreement, killed 29 people in a car bomb in Omagh—the biggest single atrocity of the Troubles. It was the year the FBI accused Bin Laden of having declared *jihad* against the United States and the year of the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, resulting in 250 deaths and 5,000 injuries. In the same year, rebels backed by Rwanda and Uganda took up arms against the Democratic Republic of Congo President Laurent Kabila. This led to a bloody conflict, which claimed the lives of 3 million people over the subsequent years and is the focus of Kadiangandu and Mullet's (this issue) article. In addition, the international human rights community seemingly had little faith in countries voluntarily facing their past abuses, and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court was established in 1998.

Thus, we can see, although the new millennium has been ushered in with a forgiveness- and reconciliation-oriented political *zeitgeist* in some quarters, elsewhere human rights abuses have continued creating concerns about ongoing impunity. To stop impunity, some, such as the Coalition for the International Criminal Court, argue for more rigorous prosecution through institutions such as the International Criminal Court. At the same time, where it is not practically and politically possible to prosecute all human rights abusers, alternative ways to reckon with the past have also been sought. In this context, truth commissions have become increasingly prevalent. Although there have been more than 20 truth commissions run since the 1970s (Hayner, 1997, 2001), it is only in the late 1990s that they started to be seen as essen-

tial processes for democratic transition. The popularity of truth commissions, and the substantial consideration given at a political level to concepts such as forgiveness and reconciliation, are linked to a range of developments. One such development is the growth of (largely Western) expressive, psychologically minded individualism from the late 1980s onward (Summerfield, 2001).

During this period we see a shift in the culture regarding attitudes toward victimhood. In the Western world the concept of victim gets embraced rather than shunned (Novick, 2001). This is typified in a recent editorial by the *American Journal of Psychiatry* commenting that posttraumatic stress disorder is one of the few psychiatric diagnoses that anyone would like to have (cited in Summerfield, 2001). It appears as if the cultural icon of the strong, silent hero gets replaced by the vulnerable antihero; sensitivity replaces stoicism, and voicing pain and outrage is said to be "empowering" as well as therapeutic (Novick, 2001).

One possible explanation for this shift is that after decades of brutal conflict and failed peace processes, as well as the gradual breakdown of so-called traditional society, a backlash takes place that challenges the separation of church/morality/the individual and the state. The individual, moral, and human aspects of society (exemplified by political parties pushing the family values line from the late 1980s onward) make a resurgence.

This trend can be seen in other ways too. For example, politicians from the late 1990s started to refer routinely to their own integrity, emotionality, morality, and feelings as critical to their decision-making process. For example, referring to the fact that no weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq, Tony Blair was quoted as saying, "Do I know I'm right? Judgements aren't the same as facts. Instinct is not science. I'm like any other human being, as fallible and as capable of being wrong. I only know what I believe" (Blair, 2004, para. 16). This is also evidenced by the emphasis on moral restoration in South Africa with the launch of the Moral Regeneration Movement, a government-supported campaign that aims to facilitate, encourage, and coordinate programs aimed at restoring the moral fiber of society.

Questions concerning transitional justice have also become integrally linked with questions of morality and victimhood. For example, it is the victims' suffering—and questions of morality—that are now at the core of how truth commissions work (at least at public and populist levels) and not only their legal and investigative power. Michael Humphrey (2002) argued that truth commissions seek the "truth" largely through the stories of victims' suffering and individual testimonies: the power of victims' "words is not legal … but empathetic" (p. 106), and this sharing of truth has a moral implication in that it is supposed to engender acknowledgment and collective responsibility. As such, for Humphrey, testimony of suffering before tribunals and truth commissions is aimed at constructing the individual victim as the foundation for moral and social reconstruction (Humphrey, 2002, p. 106). With so-called normative behavior eroded by years of conflict and violence, it appears as if "morality" is gradually becoming the new foundation of a burgeoning rule of law in societies in transition.

Thus, the personal (the experience of the individual victim) has, in contemporary society, become linked with the political. The person is not only political, but the political is the person (see Cohen, 1996). Political and social solutions to violence are sought through the experience of the individual, with the individual and the political realms moving inevitably closer. To this end, it is not surprising that concepts such as forgiveness and reconciliation have gained such popular appeal and political usage. This also helps explain, at least in part, how terms such as *forgiveness* and *reconciliation,* originally considered individual processes, have moved into the political realm. As Chapman (this issue) points out, reconciliation in the South African case often became equated "with interpersonal forgiveness between victims and perpetrators" (p. 52). However, the intersection of individual processes with collective and political ones also leaves the door open for the question, central to most articles in this issue, is intergroup forgiveness possible or helpful?

LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF INTERGROUP FORGIVENESS

In this issue, Kadiangandu and Mullet show that in the Democratic Republic of Congo the notion of intergroup forgiveness makes sense to some African communities. Kadiangandu and Mullet found that the wrongdoer must request forgiveness, preferably in public and for the whole community. The process should include special deference to the offended group and as a process should neither imply nor prohibit the expression of particular sentiments or emotions. Manzi and González (this issue) show that this may be possible in some cases because even people who have no direct relation with the conflict (even those alive a generation after it) can assume responsibility for or feel guilt for their ingroup's misdeeds. They can feel motivated to compensate or repair the other group. However, the research in this issue also shows that to genuinely take responsibility for your group's past misdeeds, or to be able to forgive those who have harmed you, several obstacles need to be overcome and a range of variables considered.

Ferguson et al. (this issue) show that the memory of political violence or the proximity to political violence, in and about Northern Ireland, may reduce the willingness to forgive. As Ferguson et al. point out, their study confirms Hewstone et al.'s (2004) prediction that being a victim and residing in locations that have witnessed high levels of violence decreases the propensity for forgiveness. Chapman's (this issue) research suggests that contrary to popular perceptions, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission did not encourage forgiveness, nor was it a major focus of victim testimonies. In fact, many of those who testified remained angry about the process and felt that apologies from those responsible for their victimization had not been forthcoming, making thoughts of forgiveness im-

possible. Similarly, Mellor, Bretherton, and Firth (this issue) throw doubt on the concept of forgiveness by indigenous Australians for colonial transgressions by nonindigenous Australians given the lack of apology and acceptance of responsibility by them. Manzi and González (this issue) found that for those who associate with the left wing in Chile, even right wing remorse or truth might not be enough to prompt forgiveness. They conclude that forgiving past atrocities is not easy, and, as long as feelings of anger remain there is little prospect of forgiveness.

The articles thus show that although forgiveness at an intergroup level may be possible (or desired, as Kadiangandu and Mullet found), there are a range of variables that determine its prospects, but how exactly would the process of intergroup forgiveness, if it were to happen, influence the political landscape and vice versa? The answer to this question is linked to how the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation relate to one another and how the political context, in turn, relates to them.

RELATION BETWEEN FORGIVENESS
AND RECONCILIATION

How the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation relate to each other is a further debate implicit within the articles in this issue. Enright (2001), referring to interpersonal forgiveness, argued that reconciliation is the act of two people coming together following separation; forgiveness is more moral in nature and starts as a private act. He contended that "one may forgive and not reconcile, but one never truly reconciles without some form of forgiving taking place" (p. 31). Others share this view that forgiveness is the forerunner to reconciliation (McLernon, Cairns, Lewis, & Hewstone, 2003) but point out that there is a debate whether there can be reconciliation without forgiveness or forgiveness without reconciliation.

Unlike the social psychological focus on intergroup relations, as typified by the articles in this issue, those focusing on the political aspects of social transformation see the reconciliation and forgiveness debate differently. A recent literature review of the work focusing largely on reconciliation in the transitional justice field (Hamber & Kelly, 2005) suggests that reconciliation does not imply seeking the Holy Grail of forgiveness as a prerequisite (Huyse, 2003). The main concern for social scientists working in the political field is that a political push toward forgiveness can too easily be exploited by politicians to hide the truth about the past. They highlight the danger that political leadership can use terms such as r*econciliation* to foster what Ignatieff (1996) called "false reconciliation," where they "indulge in the illusion that they had put the past behind them" with the party responsible for injustice trying to impose a "forgive and forget" mentality (p. 110). Some victims who testified to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, complained of "false reconciliation"; that is, they felt forced to reconcile or that they were expected to forgive the perpetrators (Hamber, Maepa, Mofokeng, & van der

Merwe, 1998). In Northern Ireland, as Ferguson et al. highlight in this issue (drawing on the work of Cairns, Mallet, Lewis, & Wilson, 2003, and McLernon et al., 2003) victims of political violence often reject the concept of forgiveness because they equate it with pardoning, whereas others think forgiving might mean forgetting, something they are not prepared to do given their suffering. That said, this is not to say that those focusing on forgiveness in intergroup relations see forgiveness as "forgive and forget." McLernon et al., for example, stated clearly forgiveness is not forgetting.

According to Huyse (2003), different instruments are needed to develop a broad process of reconciliation at the political level, such as truth-telling, reparations, restorative justice, and processes to promote healing and reconciliation. Huyse argued that there are three stages to reconciliation: replacing fear by nonviolent coexistence, building confidence and trust, and moving toward empathy. The final stage, according to Huyse, needs to be accompanied by building democracy and a new socioeconomic order. For him, empathy also does not imply forgiveness or absolute harmony and does not exclude feelings of anger. This approach fits with recent developments in "transitional justice," whereby the concept of reconciliation (and generally not forgiveness) is increasingly present. Here reconciliation finds itself amid pragmatic political debates about political compromise and the degree of justice possible in countries coming out of conflict.

FORGIVENESS, RECONCILIATION, AND PRAGMATIC POLITICS

Although forgiveness is not about forgetting (McLernon et al., 2003), it does conjure up images of one-sided forgiveness whereby the person forgives and "seeks nothing from the other" (Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1994, p. 69). The latter, given the extent and brutality of much political violence, holds little currency with most victims and human rights activists in the field, with justice through the courts being the preferred option (Shuman & McCall Smith, 2000). This of course does not preclude processes of forgiveness or reconciliation taking place once individuals are incarcerated. One of the most well-known examples of this is Pope John Paul II's act of forgiveness to the jailed Mehmet Ali Agca, who had attempted to assassinate him.

Bringing perpetrators to justice is seen by some as an essential component of a victim's recovery and psychological healing (Kaminer, Stein, Mbanga, & Zungu-Dirwayi, 2001; Shuman & McCall Smith, 2000). Social psychological experiments in the workplace also show a desire to "get even" for perceived injustices (Shepard, Lewicki, & Minton, 1992; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). At a minimum it appears some form of apology or public recognition of wrongdoing is needed for forgiveness even to be contemplated, as Mellor et al. (this issue) and

Kadiangandu and Mullet (this issue) point out. Manzi and González (this issue) highlight the difficulty of attaining forgiveness given the anger many victims rightly feel following extreme suffering and injustice. In this context perhaps reconciliation, in the way political scientists construct it, might be a more realistic and pragmatic goal.

Forgiveness and reconciliation need to be seen and analyzed within and with reference to their political context. As Mellor et al. (this issue) point out, "the idea of reconciliation is contextual and relational, such that it makes no sense to talk of an absolute state of reconciliation. Rather, the use of the term *reconciliation* invites questions about who and what needs to be reconciled and why" (p. 16). The political context, wrote Lerche (2000), "inevitably has an impact on the practice and consequences of truth telling and, by implication, on its contribution to reconciliation."[1] Thus, reconciliation and forgiveness are not concepts that can be simply transposed from one context to another as if they hold universal appeal and are relevant in all situations.

That said, fears of unchecked impunity and politically expedient calls for reconciliation and forgiveness and the wish for a more accommodating and humanist approach that opens the door for reconciliation and forgiveness are linked. Bauman's (2001) understanding of the notion of community, namely, that "Community is nowadays another name for paradise lost—but one to which we dearly hope to return, and so we feverishly seek the roads that may bring us there" (p. 3) can be applied, at least analogously, to the notions of reconciliation and forgiveness. Given the centuries of human suffering due to war (and the political developments of the 20th century that tried to remove the moral, religious, and individual from politics as the first section of this article outlines), one could argue that forgiveness and reconciliation have come to represent the "paradise lost" of modern society. The often idealized view of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission highlights this desire in international consciousness. As Archbishop Tutu (1999) pointed out in his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, if South Africa can do it with its ghoulish history, it somehow gives hope to the rest of the world.

This is not to say that work on forgiveness and reconciliation, as the articles in this issue are testament to, is based on some misguided moral desire for a better world and thus irrelevant in the pragmatic world of politics. Rather, they are attempts by academics and practitioners to grapple with the questions of alternative ways to building sustainable peace given that past (largely political) attempts have routinely failed. The articles demonstrate that perhaps one of the reasons wars continue to abound the world over is because genuine processes of reconciliation (and perhaps forgiveness) have not taken place. Genuine reconciliation is about facing the difficult questions about the past, and this includes considering how any pro-

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[1]http://www.gmu.edu/academic/ijps/vol5_2/lerche.htm, para. 6, "Broadening the Scope" section.

cess of reconciliation might relate to retributive justice. Genuine reconciliation is not about the outcome of "harmony," as many fear, or cheap forgiveness, but a multifaceted and complex process that includes accounting for past crimes. More recent definitions of reconciliation argue for a wide range of processes at the macro and micro levels as part of the process of reconciliation. These include developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society; acknowledging and dealing with the past; building positive relationships; significant cultural and attitudinal change; and substantial social, economic, and political change (Hamber & Kelly, 2005).

In a study Hamber and Kelly (2005) carried out in Northern Ireland, it was found that although some community groups and politicians had fears about "false reconciliation," the polar opposite concern was also evident. Respondents in the study feared a reconciliation process that might be too deep. One of the major findings of this research was that reconciliation is seen as a challenging and sometimes threatening process. Respondents chose not to use the term in their daily work because they feared it would scare people off. In some cases this might have been associated with the perceived religious overtones, but in others it was because reconciliation was understood as somewhere "coming together" and thus some process of social and political transformation. Respondents were not sure if their ingroup was ready for this at that point in time. They certainly were not ready to consider the concept of forgiveness in any shape or form.

Furthermore, the process of reconciliation also contains paradoxes and even contradictions; it is neither neat nor easy and in itself can seem incongruous. As Lederach (1998) noted,

> reconciliation can be seen as dealing with three specific paradoxes. First, in an overall sense, reconciliation promotes an encounter between the open expression of the painful past, on the one hand, and the search for the articulation of a long-term, interdependent future, on the other hand. Second, reconciliation provides a place for truth and mercy to meet, where concerns for exposing what has happened *and* for letting go in favour of renewed relationship are validated and embraced. Third, reconciliation recognises the need to give time and place to both justice and peace, where redressing the wrong is held together with the envisioning of a common, connected future. (p. 20)

Reconciliation entails engaging in addressing these complex paradoxes. To negotiate the paradoxes various processes might be necessary such as apology, justice, reparations, and possibly forgiveness. It is often assumed, for example, that concepts such as justice and reconciliation (and forgiveness) are polar opposites. However, as paradoxical as it may sound, a more nuanced understanding of reconciliation means negotiating the complex and unique relation between such processes in any given context, rather than presenting them as mutually exclusive op-

tions for a society coming out of conflict. If deeply divided societies are to function, the process of grappling with paradoxes has to take place. This is exactly why understanding concepts such as reconciliation as a conditional and contested *process*, rather than a harmonious *outcome*, is critical. The same can be said for forgiveness.

The research presented in the articles in this issue sound a note of caution and show the need for a more minimalist approach to forgiveness; that is, apology or recognition of wrongdoing needs to take place before forgiveness can be considered. Preconditions also have to be met such as dealing with anger, as Manzi and González (this issue) found in their research. The articles in this issue thus demonstrate the importance of not letting the desire for paradise lost cloud the difficulties forgiveness as a concept poses. In this context, Mellor and colleagues' (this issue) use of the notion of "negotiated forgiveness" is helpful. Although this too may be a tall order in societies emerging from conflict, the value of the concept is that it implies conditionality on the process of forgiveness, such as apology from the perpetrator, acknowledgment, and accountability. This seems more suited to political contexts in which horrendous crimes have been committed and ongoing impunity is a concern. It also bridges the gap between social psychological thinking on forgiveness and those approaching the subject from a more political perspective.

This does not mean, however, that there is no place for humanism in politics or that individual processes of forgiveness and reconciliation do not have their value. Addressing the micro and macro relationships between individuals and groups in and after conflict are integral to helping create conducive social and political spaces. It is the easy option to say reconciliation, and even the notion of forgiveness, have no place in the political process. The more difficult choice is to seek ways, relevant to the cultural context and political environment, to deal with legacies of political violence and build better futures. The scientific inquiry at the heart of the contributions in this issue is one step toward this.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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From the standpoint of preserving the most important resource that any society ever has, and that is its children– women have got to become involved. So I really deeply feel that women can no longer be shrinking violets in a world which is threatened more and more by annihilation.

Shirley Chisholm (1924-2005),
former member of the U.S. House of Representatives