

Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Quest for an Enduring Narrative for our Common Life

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I begin with a confession. Had I been asked six years ago to speak on the question of forgiveness and reconciliation, in the context of an interfaith gathering, I would likely have offered a purely confessional presentation – that is, a reflection based on my religious tradition’s understanding of these biblical and theological concepts – and would probably have done so substantially in a vacuum. Six years ago the *context* – an interfaith gathering such as this – would, I have to admit, have made barely any impact on my approach. Even had I thought to do so, linking the question of forgiveness, reconciliation, and interfaith relations might have felt to me like forcing, though the approach, an inappropriate agenda – as if saying that there was a greater need for a conversation about forgiveness and reconciliation among people of faith than there was about discussing the topic in the abstract. How much more uplifting, I might have thought, to reflect only from the best of what my confessional tradition has to offer, and reciprocally learn the best of others’ traditions. Interreligious conflict, and the resulting need for forgiveness and reconciliation, has of course been in significant evidence around the world for a very long time, but six years ago I may have thought, coming from a cultural setting which has for decades engaged in interfaith dialogue, that to focus on those realities would be entirely too disempowering. The more edifying approach, I might have thought, would focus on what our traditions have to teach each other in spite of the periodic difficulties in our relationships.

How naïve that now feels to me. Focusing on current relational difficulties is of course by no means the *only* fruitful approach for us as people of faith. But it no longer feels appropriate to discuss reconciliation and forgiveness as if the setting in which we do so – an interfaith conference – were accidental or even irrelevant. Post September 11, 2001, many Christians in the United States – many more, in fact, than I suspect would be willing to admit – believe that the entire *topic* of interfaith relations is characterized by a battle for religious sovereignty – and if not a battle for institutional religious sovereignty, at least one for the domination of religious practice. It is not hard to understand why this is so. Well-publicized statements from radicals of one religious tradition or another, decreeing war on others – and let’s be clear that more than one tradition is guilty of this – offer sufficient anecdotal *and* material evidence for those perceptions. Abhorrent proclamations heard from leaders of one government or another desiring the annihilation of entire religious groups makes it clear that this is not our imagination, and that evil intentions are alive and well everywhere. Our perceptions about the fundamental character of interreligious relations are also influenced both by political rhetoric from our own governments, and by media shining a spotlight upon religious conflict as the interpretive lens through which to view all of the current troubling world events. In many settings in the United States – though not all, of course – we seem to have moved disturbingly quickly from understanding “interfaith relations” primarily as an exercise in dialogue and cooperative action to a concept where the dominant motif is adversarial struggle and where each feels they stand as the most injured party.

And in this context we come together to discuss forgiveness and reconciliation as seen through our faith traditions. A great deal of ink has been spent explicating Christian views of these two inextricably linked topics. As I am neither a historical theologian nor a biblical scholar I will leave those reflections to persons more competent to offer the scholarly observations. Instead, I would like to risk linking our interfaith context here to the topic. First I’ll offer a reflection on

how our approach to scripture influences the way we understand reconciliation with partners of other faith traditions; second, I will reflect on how our orientation toward interfaith relations influences our action; and finally I will explore how we see our responsibility as faithful members of religious traditions in deliberating on these questions, and what our collective wisdom can contribute to a different narrative for the sake of the world we inhabit together. All of my observations result from my life as a Reformed Christian in the United States. If there is resonance with the experience of other individuals or faith traditions here, it is entirely coincidental – I speak here only for my context and my ecclesial confession.

Spiritual grounding

Christian struggles with forgiveness and reconciliation in the context of interfaith relations did not, of course, begin on September 11 or 12, 2001. The history of the church is filled with ambiguous and even ambivalent postures toward these foundational elements of our faith as revealed in Scripture. We read what seem to be conflicting words and stories from the Bible. “Love your enemy.” “An eye for an eye.” “Turn the other cheek.” Included are countless examples of violent vindication for perpetrated wrongs, apparently sanctioned by the God of our forebears. A culture of violence in my own country doesn’t help a Christian navigate these scriptural waters which can feel turbulent or at least confusing even in the best of times.

Many, however, have long had the benefit of scriptural interpretation which compels us away from a single-layered reading of certain texts to a reassessment of what is expected of us. These renewed readings can relate in a powerful way to the question of our interfaith relations. We know, for example, that although Christians often interpret “turn the other cheek” as a gesture of holy submission or forgiveness – and even one that elevates suffering to the category of a Christian virtue – that phrase contains a very complex cultural implication for the setting in which it was proclaimed. Understood in its context, the act of turning the other cheek could actually have the effect of reversing prescribed societal relationships. In its cultural context we know that to discipline or assault a person of a lower societal stature, one used the back of the hand. It signaled disrespect. Because touching others with the left hand was considered unsanitary and even in many settings prohibited, “turning the other cheek” offered only two other options: the cessation of assault, or using the open hand which indicated a relationship of equals. This of course offers a different perspective on what our Christian scripture might be telling us about how to respond to an affront; and ultimately offers a different perspective on what we believe the Bible tells us about forgiveness and reconciliation.

We also know that there is a significant school of scholarship illuminating the intent of the scripture in Exodus exhorting “an eye for an eye.” In many contexts this was understood as a deterrent to inequitable retaliation when an offense was perpetrated, rather than *carte blanche* permission or even expectation to respond in kind or with greater force. How one interprets “equitable,” of course, is not a simple thing and has for five years been a very prominent question in the United States. Each generation must struggle with the consequences of their interpretations, but scholarly work shows us that there is far more to the intent of both of these texts than is often the case in popular perception.

So, seen through this lens, both the verse in the Sermon on the Mount and the passage in Exodus urge Christians to challenge our understanding of appropriate response when we are wronged or

attacked. These lenses call us to change the playing field – and its rules – when responding to an affront.

It is no surprise that many Christians in the United States today interpret these scriptures in a different way than what I have offered above. The anecdotal and material evidence I reference about how members of different traditions feel about each other, or want to see happen to each other – results both of personal experience and the way information is transmitted to us – fuels the fires for those who would offer us a theology of recrimination, retribution and retaliation. In such a context the text from the Sermon on the Mount is dismissed as naïve and irrelevant because it is seen as acquiescing to ineffectual passivism; and the text from Exodus that one should take “an eye for an eye” is believed to be correctly interpreted only if it tells us that we must do *at least* as much, if not more, to another as they have done to us. “Love your enemies” is rationalized into oblivion as being completely inappropriate – or even dangerous – in an age of terror and prohibited liquids.

And, perhaps for our purposes today most important, in this kind of interpretive context (and for more Christians in the United States than I suspect would dare admit it) the “enemy” is all too easily identified not only as the religious *traditions* claimed by fanatics (of all stripes) but also as *anyone* – including Christians – seeking to offer a different narrative for how we should relate to *people* of those other faiths. This can have a devastating consequence for interfaith relations. If we believe, for example, that interpretations of the Exodus text justifies a culture of revenge, and the verse in the Sermon on the Mount points to a posture of foolish submission, then there will be no basis upon which we as Christians can be reliable partners in shaping a culture of reconciliation in which forgiveness is necessary and nurturing relationship non-negotiable.

For Christians of the Reformed tradition in the United States, of which my own church is a part, interpreting scripture in our current context is not only practiced, but expected. It is therefore imperative that we remain vigilant about the *ramifications* of our understanding of scripture in a culture of pervasive and insidious violence. I believe that it has a profound impact on our spiritual health and is directly related to our ability to form relationships with partners – relationships which can provide a basis for a renewed culture of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Orientation toward the practice of interfaith relations

How we interpret scripture helps us establish an orientation for forgiveness and reconciliation in a global context which seeks to push us far away from both. In a press statement after a summer, 2006 visit to Lebanon, members from a World Council of Churches delegation reflected on the following experience:

“ They [the participants] noted that Lebanese of all religious faiths – Christians – Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic – and Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'ia - had remained firmly unified despite the enormously divisive pressures of the war. For the community leaders, this represents a guarantee for peace.”

For communities such as my own, an orientation toward reconciliation and forgiveness rather than retaliation and resentful, isolationist entrenchment requires of us a willingness to break

barriers with what has become very comfortable conventional wisdom. It requires us to release years of conditioning to see possibilities for reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace by refusing to allow others to tell us who is our enemy. It requires us to take the initiative to build relationships with people of other faith traditions even when that feels, or maybe even is, dangerous; and even when we worry that others will label us as disloyal – or perhaps even unpatriotic – for doing so. It is especially shameful for Christians in the United States, with more cultural and financial power than imaginable in most parts of the world, not to exhibit the courage necessary to take steps for reconciliation which others, in other contexts, may legitimately find too risky.

Even so, for Christians in the United States there is a hidden difficulty even in this. Even when we find the courage to build and sustain relationships which others tell us are dangerous, foolish or wrong, Christian communities – especially wealthy or prestigious ones in the West – have had a history of doing so somewhat unilaterally – implying that when *we* are ready to build relationships (sometimes after great delay!), others should be as well, and our initiative can sometimes mean that our Christian agenda dominates. Our good intentions are often clear, but the history of Christian mission and current world circumstances demand that we *very* carefully examine our agendas and never, ever try to establish them unilaterally. This is important even when we take initiative out of a genuine desire for reconciliation, and even when doing so comes at the cost of offering, or considering, painful forgiveness – such as felt by many after September 11. The current status of many global relationships require that we do what we do in *partnership*, and sometimes this means careful negotiation with colleagues who see the world *very* differently. Even our best Christian convictions and intentions can work against both forgiveness and reconciliation if not approached in partnership.

My Christian tradition is located in the Reformed branch of the church's family tree. [*For convenience I will use the name we use for ourselves as I continue my reflection, which is "Reformed" Christians.*] One of the phrases we use to describe our ecclesial orientation is of a church "reformed and always reforming." In English translation, one element of that self-understanding can be hidden. The "reformed" part is clear – relating mostly to the arguments of the 16th century – but in Latin the phrase used for "always reforming" is *semper reformanda*. The verb form shows that the clearest translation to capture the meaning of the word "*reformanda*" would be "always *being* reformed." While, at least in my experience, rarely used in connection with interfaith relationships or reconciliation, I believe this phrase which is so familiar to Reformed Christians can provide an important reminder and opportunity. When we understand ourselves to be a part of the church always "*being* reformed," we therefore also know the capacity to be *transformed* by our relationships and experiences. We are not only, therefore, called to lives where we challenge the conventional response to an affront. We are also called to live in a way such that relationship – an obvious but in my experience sometimes overlooked prerequisite for any reconciliation – has the ability both to *reform* and *transform* us.

Faithful discipleship for a Reformed Christian, then, is not simply to hear scripture in such a way that we *reform* the conventional and popular rules of the game when encountering affront. We are also required to take another step and allow ourselves to be *transformed* by the encounter with *people* of other faiths whose gifts have much to teach us. By so doing we move from a constant posture of *reaction* to one where personal, spiritual and ecclesial orientation nurture

fertile enough ground where forgiveness has a chance and where reconciliation is the expected, rather than the surprising, outcome.

Behaviour and transforming relationships

Finally a reflection on our behaviour and its impact on transforming – and being transformed – by relationships. Ecclesiastical giants such as Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King Jr., to name just two, have written prolifically on the questions of how Christians, oppressed by systems and affronted by directed violence, can choose to live their lives in ways that retain dignity and radically transform the context from one of fear and violence to reconciliation and peace.

Though history has given us examples of the extraordinary witness of Christians such as King and Tutu who have demonstrated the human capacity to move to reconciliation even if the offending parties do not acknowledge culpability, it is very difficult to achieve or even desire reconciliation when those who have given offense do not apologize. It is that much *more* difficult when there is not only no apology but instead an affirmation of the act of hostility and a commitment to more. When citizens of the United States feel constantly bombarded at this time by images of religious extremism, and by political interpretations which rely on retributive justice as the primary paradigm for response, it is extremely difficult to want to move beyond those comfortable postures and claim the radical and reconciling nature of our Christian faith. And if we're to be honest, we Christians must acknowledge that, throughout our 2000 year history, we've frequently been willing accomplices in perpetuating this paradigm. Sometimes it's hard to know which institution – the church or the state – has been the more effective instigator of violence and retribution. But our history notwithstanding, our Christian faith calls us to something different.

For Christians, prevailing paradigms of violence and retaliation should be considered anathema to a faith which looks to Jesus Christ as the ultimate evidence of God's reconciling love. We know this not because we are committed to a romantic and, in my view, often wrong-headed elevation of suffering as a virtue, but because Christ, *especially* in the Sermon on the Mount, calls us, in the face of affront, to effect a fundamental change to both the playing field and the rules of the game. Our culture – which is shaped not only by our government and our media but by our churches as well – may tell us that retributive justice is the *only* appropriate response, and that the only sufficient interpretation of the biblical text exhorting “an eye for an eye” is one which compels us to respond in kind – or worse, if we have the strength. Our *faith*, however, tells us to assert our dignity and respond not in kind, but by making it clear to the offenders that to continue the offense debases only them. To continue harming us if we turn the other cheek requires an aggressor either to resort to transgressing their own holy laws or to unwillingly treat the object of their disdain with respect by using an open hand to meet the “other” cheek.

This perspective will not eliminate future affronts – not even our scripture tells us it will. Those intent on destruction – on *all* sides of an aggression – will generally pursue their objectives – as we well know – whether or not it debases them. But it does allow the object of the aggression to remain faithful even in the face of the violence.

To be the church in the Reformed tradition is to be ever-open to how the winds of the Holy Spirit will speak to us, exhorting us to be faithful to the Gospel both in the context of, and sometimes *in spite of*, the ecclesial and political cultures in which we live. This compels us to risk a reputation of contrariness, making us unpopular with the ecclesial and political powers when we insist on shifting the conventional rules of the game.

Is this naïve? Perhaps. My guess is that today Jesus would not last ten minutes in the context of most of our political governing bodies. But that's precisely the point. Our Christian faith is one which calls us to acknowledge that the God made known to us through a supreme act of love by coming into the world in the person of Jesus is the same God whose Trinitarian nature is, for us, also the supreme example of eternal reconciliation.

And so I conclude where I began. I believe strongly that we as people of peace and faith must explore the parameters of reconciliation and forgiveness not just in the isolation of our own tradition's perspective and religious construct, but also *together*, asking how we can allow both forgiveness and reconciliation, rather than retribution and conquest, to provide the enduring narrative for our common life. Such a re-orientation, if done *together*, might even hint at a chance for peace.