FORGIVING ENEMIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Among the hill tribes of southern Afghanistan, I am told, talk of forgiveness and reconciliation connotes grubby compromise and dishonour.¹ For many people the issue that ought to arise after conflict is that of justice, even vengeance, not forgiveness and reconciliation. And their point is not merely that justice should have priority, but that talk of forgiveness and reconciliation actually confuses matters and hinders justice.

While some people admired Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s urging victims to embrace perpetrators during the amnesty hearings of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and while they marveled at a process that aspired to reconciliation rather than retribution, others were uneasy and skeptical. The public shows of reconciliation seemed unnatural and forced. And didn’t such forgiveness let the torturers and killers off too lightly? Didn’t it trivialize the terrible wrongs they’d done? Worse, didn’t it trivialize the victims themselves?

At a conference I ran just over ten years ago on Burying the Past after Civil Conflict, we started off talking unselfconsciously about forgiveness and reconciliation, until a young woman, who had been twice imprisoned by the communist authorities in East Germany for dissident activity, stood up. “What on earth are you talking about?”, she said. “What’s all this talk about forgiveness and reconciliation? I now live on the same street as the man who informed on me. I didn’t know him then and I sure as damn don’t want to know him now. What do you mean by ‘reconciliation’?”

And what do I mean by forgiveness in Northern Ireland? Why do I even raise the matter?

Well, in part, it’s a reflex. I’m a Christian, and the obligation to forgive wrongdoers is a very prominent one in the teaching and example of Jesus. So Christians are pretty much bound to consider what forgiveness requires, when faced with the business of righting wrongs. Talk of forgiveness is not unique to Christianity, of course, but it does seem to be uniquely pronounced there. And I say that, not, I think, out of Christian chauvinism, but on the ground of observations made by a number of Jews—observations that are often more critical than approving.

So, as a Christian the issue of forgiveness interests me, but why should it interest anyone else? Well, churchgoing may be a minority sport in the United Kingdom as a whole, but in the 2001 census 72% of the population still identified themselves as Christian. And since churchgoing in Northern Ireland is about three times as popular as it is in England,² it’s reasonable to assume that many people there will recognize the relevance of the topic of forgiveness to their political situation.

Nevertheless, confessing Christians are not the only ones to whom the obligation of forgiveness makes some sense. Long experience has taught common wisdom that vengeance is not simply an act that one does; it’s a power that enslaves. The point is strikingly made in Peter Shaffer’s play, *The Gift of the Gorgon*. There, Edward Damson, offspring of Slav and Celtic parentage and therefore hot-blooded, champions the cleansing, cathartic virtue of the passion for revenge. Liberal forbearance and tolerance, in his eyes, is “just giving up with a shrug—as if you never really cared about the wrong in the first place…. Avoidance, that’s all it is!”³ To this, Helen, his wife—English and therefore cool and rational—retorts:

You go on about passion, Edward. But have you never realised that there are many, many kinds—including a passion to kill our own passion when it’s wrong?… The truest, hardest most adult passion is not just stamping and geeing ourselves up. It’s refusing to be led by rage when we most want to be…. No other being in the universe can change itself by conscious will: it is *our privilege alone*. To take out inch by inch this spear in our sides that goads
us on and on to bloodshed—and still make sure it doesn’t take our guts with
it.  

At the very end of the play, Helen wins the argument by showing that it is forgiveness, not
revenge, which requires the greater strength and realizes humanity. Nevertheless, there is one
cliff-hanging moment when, enraged by a macabre trick that Edward has played on her,
Helen sways on the brink of plunging into vengeance. What pull her back are the bald words
of her stepson, Philip: “The truth is,” he says, “you must forgive him or die”.  
That is to say, she must forgive or forever be possessed by demons of bitterness.

Another, real-life expression of this prudential wisdom comes from the lips of the
daughter of one of three women taken from the Spanish village of Poyales del Hoyo on the
night of 29 December 1936 and murdered by Fallangists at the roadside. Interviewed sixty-
six years later, she said: “This thing has stayed in my mind all my life. I have never forgotten.
I am reliving it now, as we stand here. All the killers were from the village…. I can pardon,
but I cannot forget. We have to pardon them or it makes us just like them”.

So quite apart from Christian tradition and its ethics, common wisdom teaches the
victims of atrocious wrong that spiritual self-preservation requires the moderation of vengeful
resentment and bitterness. One mustn’t let the whole of one’s future be trapped by the
dreadful past. And this inner, psychological work of getting some control over one’s
resentment is an important part of what forgiveness is about.

Self-preservation, however, is not the only motive for the victim to moderate her
resentment. Another is sympathy or compassion for the perpetrator. Now this notion is
controversial. Not everyone buys it. I propose it on the ground of the Christian belief in the
universalism of sin, and more specifically the belief that, notwithstanding their moral freedom
and responsibility, all human beings are finite and somewhat fated creatures, weighed down
by historical and social baggage. I don’t think that it’s hard to find empirical corroboration
this view. It seems to me that any person who engages in honest reflection will recognise that
she herself is no stranger to the social and psychic powers that drive human beings to abuse
each other; that some individuals, for reasons that remain hidden in the mysterious
interpenetration of history and the human will, are less well equipped than others to resist
common pressures; and that some are fated to find themselves trapped in situations where
only an extraordinary moral heroism could save them from doing terrible evil. I think that
these are all truths about the human condition, and, at the risk of sounding callous and
moralistic, I think that even victims have a responsibility to recognize them. If they do, then
they will discover an additional motive to rein in their resentment: not only self-preservation,
but also compassion for the wrongdoer.

Whether through an instinct for self-preservation or through the extension of
compassion, the moderation of resentment is the inner, psychological work of forgiveness. It
is also unilateral and unconditional: it’s something that victims can and should get on with
regardless of what the perpetrator does or does not do.

But not all of the work of forgiveness is internal. Some of it is relational. After all, the
victim’s forgiveness is only necessary because someone else has injured him, because trust of
some kind has been broken. So forgiveness is not just about the victim’s inner psychological
state; it’s also about her relationship with her oppressor. Some people, especially Protestant
Christians, think that victims are bound to forgive their oppressors unilaterally and
unconditionally—that is, without waiting for any sign of repentance. Probably the most
famous Northern Irish expression of such a view was when Gordon Wilson, in the immediate
aftermath of his daughter’s death in the IRA’s 1987 Remembrance Day bombing at
Enniskillen asserted, “I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. That dirty sort of talk is not going to
bring her back to life”.
Not everyone, not every Christian, however, thinks that forgiveness *should* be unilateral and unconditional *in relation to the wrongdoer*. Some think that the victim’s forgiveness must wait upon the other’s repentance, if it is to be morally responsible. What they have in mind here is the forgiveness that says to the wrongdoer, “The trust that was broken is now restored. We are reconciled. Our future will no longer be haunted by our ruptured past.” What they have in mind is the moment of forgiveness that completes the process of reconciliation. This ‘forgiveness-as-absolution’ should not be granted unilaterally and unconditionally, because to proffer trust to someone who has shown himself to be untrustworthy and who is unrepentant about it is, at very least, foolish. It simply invites them to repeat the injury. It is also careless of the wrongdoer, for it robs him of the salutary stimulus to reflect, learn, and grow, which the punitive withholding of trust constitutes. Even worse, it degrades him by implying that what he does is of no consequence. Worse still, it degrades the victim by implying that her injury is of no consequence. Out of respect and care for both the wrongdoer and the victim, then, forgiveness-as-absolution should wait for the green light of his genuine repentance.

My view is that there *is* a unilateral and unconditional part of forgiveness—there *is* a moment of sheer grace. This, however, comprises the reining in of resentment motivated by self-preservation and compassion. It should *not* comprise the granting of absolution. For the reasons stated, that should remain reciprocal and conditional.

One major advantage of thinking about forgiveness in this way is that it avoids presenting it as a rival to justice. For as I see it, the process of reconciliation contains not only initial compassion and final absolution, but also between them the contradiction of injustice by the expression of proportionate resentment and the meting out of punishment. Forgiveness-as-compassion qualifies, but does not replace, resentment and punishment. It makes them media of communication intended to persuade the wrongdoer of the wrong he has done, to elicit his repentance, and so to enable forgiveness-as-absolution and consequent reconciliation. By ordering resentment and punishment toward reconciliation, it saves them from vengeance and its destructive excesses.

Given this understanding of forgiveness, how do I see it bearing on the politics of post-Troubles Northern Ireland?

(Before I set about answering that question, let me make clear—because it’s important—that I don’t approach the Troubles in Northern Ireland from the stereotypically English position of Olympian dispassion and impartiality. I’m less English than I sound, I’m a Unionist, and I reckon the IRA’s thirty-year campaign of violence to have been a gross moral error. Which puts me, of course, in the excellent company of hundreds of thousands of Irish Nationalists who aren’t Republican.)

So how does my understanding of forgiveness bear on Northern Ireland? First of all, I do not think that we can expect full reconciliation, or to use the popular psychotherapeutic synonym, ‘closure’. To really close the door on the past would be to restore trust; and that would require the repentance that enables forgiveness-as-absolution. During the Peace Process various parties have expressed regret at the killing and the suffering it has caused. But to regret is not yet to repent. One can regret something and still regard it as an unfortunate effect of doing what was morally necessary. No paramilitary group has yet confessed that it was wrong to take up arms; and the security forces have not yet confessed that they were wrong to use lethal force in resisting the paramilitaries. Nor are they likely to repent any time soon. This is because there are opposing stories about the Troubles, about its causes, about who was responsible, and about who was the victim and who the aggressor. What this means is that the only kind of reconciliation in Northern Ireland that is going to be possible in our lifetimes, and probably in the lifetimes of our children, will be the reconciliation of partisans. Reconciliation will have to happen between those who *continue* to
disagree passionately about what caused the Troubles and about who is basically to blame for them. In the light of this we need to reflect on what we mean by ‘reconciliation’. The word itself connotes a certain completeness, a certain conclusiveness, a certain closure. It conjures up the classic image of the reconciling embrace. (While I was writing this in my Oxford study, I was overlooked by a mantle-piece copy of one of Rembrandt’s poignant depictions of the Father stooping over and enfolding the Prodigal Son in his arms.) Now I do not doubt that there may be moments of completion, but most of the time, and especially at the complex political level, reconciliation remains frustratingly incomplete. As I see it, we live in a time of fragments. We live in the Age between on the one hand the Resurrection and the hope it inspires, and on the other the fulfillment of that hope at the End of history. Ours is an Age of much unfinished business. Too much.

The fullness of reconciliation is not something that we should expect to see much of in this world. So when we come to consider the options before Northern Ireland in dealing with its recent, violent past, one is quite unrealistic: namely, a truth commission that aspires to produce an official interpretation of the Troubles, to which the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland will agree and on the shared basis of which they will set about building a new future—as was proposed three years ago by the Healing through Remembering Project’s report, Making Peace with the Past. That aspiration seems to me sentimental. I see no indication that we are going to agree about the leading causes of the violence, or about who is most to blame for it, in the foreseeable future. This is hardly surprising. After all, the question of whether the Easter Rising of 1916 should ever have happened is still controversial in the Republic of Ireland—and that’s ninety years and three generations after the event.

However, while I see no prospect of Grand Official Closure on the controversy about the causes of the Troubles and culpability for them, I can imagine a truth commission playing more modest and worthwhile roles. One of these would be to help to satisfy a particular need for fairness. As things now stand, there is a lack of balance in the scrutiny of the past in Northern Ireland. Attention is currently focused on a handful of cases where the British state is suspected of colluding in the murder of Nationalists or Republicans. Of these, the most famous is Bloody Sunday, when paratroops shot dead thirteen protesters, into which Lord Saville’s Tribunal has been delving since 1998. In November 2008 the estimated cost of his Tribunal was £191 million, and of the other inquiries into the Hamill, Nelson, and Wright cases, £113 million.

Against this set the Historical Enquiries Team (H.E.T.). This police venture was launched in January 2006 to review all cases of deaths attributed to the Troubles, and especially the eighteen hundred that officially remain unsolved. In the light of the overall distribution of responsibility for killings during the Troubles—British Army and Northern Irish police, 10.7%; Loyalists, 27.4%; and Republicans, 55.7%—the majority of cases under examination concern deaths for which Republicans were responsible. The H.E.T.’s budget, however, is only £30 million. So: £304 million for sixteen alleged victims of the state, and £30 million for about one thousand victims of Republicans.

It is not hard to appreciate why Unionists perceive that Nationalist and Republican victims are attracting a seriously disproportionate amount of public attention and funding. This sense of unfairness causes irritation and alienation, which have political force. The H.E.T. itself could well do something to correct the imbalance of attention and to assuage the Unionist sense of alienation—although only a small minority of the cases is thought likely to yield up significant new information to the techniques of contemporary forensic science. A truth commission could add to this, if it were able to offer incentives sufficient to move perpetrators to volunteer further information, and if it were able to verify what is volunteered.
Fine, but what’s this got to do with reconciliation? Two things. First, insofar as it reassures Unionists that the Peace Process is not loaded against them, it would help to reduce their prevalent sense of grievance and alienation, and in that sense to ‘reconcile’ them to the new political arrangements. And people who have been relieved of grievance are generally freer to take risks of creative generosity.

Second, one of the main services of a truth commission is to expose the truth about the past, thereby provoking people to read their own version of history more critically and their opponents’ one more sympathetically. During one of the amnesty hearings of the T.R.C. in South Africa, a ninety year-old Afrikaaner lady, a life-long supported of apartheid, was heard to exclaim, “I did not know that my people could have done such things”. A truth commission can help to weaken old allegiances and strengthen new ones. It can help to reconcile people to a different future.

In its excellent report earlier this year the Consultative Group on the Past recommended the creation of a Legacy Commission, which could help to achieve both of the reconciling effects that I’ve mentioned. Among other things, the Commission would involve a Reconciliation Forum, where members of the opposing communities would not only tell their own stories but would get to hear the others’. I am told that a lot of this is already going on in Northern Ireland; and I imagine that in some cases at least it has caused people to think again about their own reading of the past, and so fostered a measure of human sympathy across politically partisan lines.

In addition, the Legacy Commission would also involve an information recovery process. Here, in cases where judicial prosecution is not possible—which is the vast majority of them—perpetrators would be encouraged to volunteer information in private under a guarantee of “statement protection”, which would render whatever information they were to supply inadmissible in criminal or civil proceedings. Such a process could bring to light awkward truths that would also help to disrupt partisan readings of the past.

I think, therefore, that there are important, although attenuated forms of reconciliation that could be achieved in the absence of repentance and forgiveness-as-absolution. But there is more. In addition, there is scope for the display of forgiveness-as-compassion, since, being unilateral, this does not depend on the presence of repentance. But what could it achieve? In a situation where two parties are alienated from each other, the venturing of a measure of sympathy by one can help to disarm the other. I’m thinking here that part of what stiffens enmity is the conviction that the other side simply will not listen; and that the hardness of enmity, the absolute refusal to concede anything—even things that, deep down, one knows one ought to concede—is generated by profound indignation that the other side simply will not take responsibility for the injuries they have caused. The enemy therefore cannot be trusted; and to risk vulnerability is only to invite exploitation. Suppose, however, that the enemy do not live down to their stereotype. Suppose they take prejudice by surprise. Suppose they venture a measure of understanding and sympathy. Sometimes this can loosen the deadlock, since gestures of vulnerability and generosity do have a way of inspiring and eliciting vulnerable and generous responses; and when concession is answered with concession, then we hear the sound of the icepacks of enmity beginning to break up.

This is certainly true of interpersonal relations. Could it be true of political ones? I imagine so, although I acknowledge that corporate politics complicate matters. An individual might want to take the risk of making a concession, but find that his political confrères think it naïve and foolish and either dissuade him from acting or punish him for having acted. And a leader who leaves his followers standing is no longer a leader. On the other hand, a leader who is not some way out in front of his followers is no longer a leader either. It belongs to the nature of human action in general that its effects are very hard to predict with accuracy. Sometimes the most conscientious action can have effects exactly the reverse of those
intended. And what’s true of human action in general is true of political action in spades. Nevertheless, sometimes one just needs to take the risk, trusting that, even if immediately the enemy should exploit one’s vulnerability or one’s own people repudiate it, further down the line it will bear fruit.

So I think that the political expression of forgiveness-as-compassion could be liberating and creative. But what concrete forms might this actually take? One possibility has been mooted by the Consultative Group on the Past’s report: namely, a one-off payment of £12,000 to the families of all those killed during the Troubles in recognition of their suffering. Since ‘all’ here includes, not just non-combatants and members of the security forces, but also paramilitaries, this recommendation has been fiercely controversial. Unionist critics have complained bitterly that such inclusiveness implies a moral equivalence between paramilitaries on the one hand, and their innocent victims or public servants on the other.

In my view this is not so. There is no doubt about where convicted paramilitaries stand in the eyes of public law: they are criminals. And besides, a society that would prevent justice from becoming vengeance must distinguish between criminals and their families. Nor can we presume that their next-of-kin gave willing support to those guilty of paramilitary crimes, given what we know about the terrorist intimidation that operates within republican and loyalist communities. It seems to me, then, that a ‘recognition payment’ by the state to the families even of its enemies could be a creative expression of forgiveness-as-compassion, which does not condone the crimes on paramilitaries.

Another possible expression of forgiveness-as-compassion is that Unionists and Republicans attend each other’s remembrance ceremonies. Again, I assume here that one can acknowledge and sympathise with other people’s suffering without condoning what they did to deserve it. One does not have to be a Nazi to visit a German military cemetery—as I did six years ago at Maleme in Crete—and to acknowledge that most of the men buried there were probably no more wicked than you or I, but had through force of tragic circumstance got drawn into a wicked enterprise. Indeed, the permanent exhibition at Maleme tells the story of three brothers, the youngest still in his teens, who were all killed in the same place on the same day in May 1941. How did they all end up there? The two younger ones hero-worshipped the oldest—as younger brothers do—and when he joined the parachute regiment, they followed. It’s a very human tale, and a very tragic one. One does not have to agree with what these three young men were doing falling out of the sky onto Crete in 1941, in order to share a sense of sadness and grief at their untimely deaths, and to share a sense of human fatedness. And as I stared at their photographs, I muttered to myself, “There but for the grace of God and an accident of history, go I…. O Lord, have mercy on us all.”

And later, when my eyes ran down the names on the memorials to I.R.A. volunteers in West Belfast’s Milltown cemetery, I—a Unionist—found myself saying the same thing.

It is, of course, one thing for to visit the enemy’s memorials alone, and to show a certain discreet solidarity, as I did. It’s quite another to take part in the enemy’s public commemorations. I imagine, for example, that a Unionist who tried to take part in a Republican commemoration would not find himself terribly welcome, even if he were to escape in one piece. So is my thinking here not just sentimental and romantic, as one friend and former member of the R.U.C. has suggested? I don’t think so. I can at least point to one recent precedent: namely, when in 2002 Alex Maskey, the first Republican Lord Mayor of Belfast, risked transgressing tribal boundaries by laying a wreath at the Belfast Cenotaph, which had the remarkable effect of moving Kevin Myers, one of the Republicans’ fiercest critics, to public applause.

Before I close, let me summarise what I think of forgiving enemies in Northern Ireland. First, we should not hold our breathe in anticipation that either side is about to confess fundamental fault and repent. The issue of who is primarily to blame for the Troubles
will be with us for many decades to come. Judging by the experience of the Republic of Ireland and Spain after their civil conflicts, it will take about two generations before such matters can begin to be discussed candidly—that is, when all those directly involved are dead and when the issue has ceased to be politically charged. So, no closure, no full embrace this side of the grave. Accommodation, co-existence, cooperation, Yes; but not reconciliation.

That’s the bad news. But there is good news too. Attenuated forms of reconciliation are possible in the absence of repentance and the forgiveness-as-absolution that it enables. A Legacy Commission, for example, could help to reconcile Unionists to the Peace Process and its political arrangements; and it could expose truths that would foster second thoughts about one’s own partisan story and greater sympathy for the enemy’s.

Further, forgiveness-as-compassion could find expression in non-partisan tokens of compensation paid to families who have suffered bereavement on account of the Troubles—even if they were bereaved of someone guilty of criminal violence. And it could also find expression through participation in the enemy’s ceremonies of remembrance—or in some other courageous gesture of human solidarity in lamenting our common fatedness and our common sinfulness.

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NOTES

1 On page 17 of a draft of a British Army document entitled “Reconciliation in Conflict—A Guide for Commanders”, which was under discussion at a conference at the Army’s Land Warfare Centre at Warminster on 28 October 2009.

2 According to the 2007 Tearfund survey of churchgoing in the UK only 14% of the English population are regular churchgoers. The equivalent figure for Northern Ireland is 45%.


4 Ibid., pp. 60-61.

5 Ibid., p. 92.


8 For an ethically nuanced instance of contemporary “revisionist” arguments against the justification of the Easter Rising, see Murphy 2007, 329-51. This essay was originally presented at a much reported conference held at University College Cork to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Easter Rising. For a running debate about the rights and wrongs of the Rising, see the Letters pages of the *Irish Times* over several months in the run-up to the public commemoration in April 2006.

9 Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, 2009, p. 113. (The report has no title and discloses neither its publisher nor its place of publication.)

10 An informed source has mentioned to me the figure of three hundred, which is just over 9% of all Troubles-related deaths, and under 17% of the officially unsolved cases.

11 Different people, of course, will have different motives for volunteering or withholding the truth. The promise of “statement protection”, rendering volunteered information inadmissible in court (Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, pp. 129-30), would certainly be an incentive. Whether it would be a sufficient incentive in all cases, however, I doubt. I doubt, for example, that it would motivate the former Loyalist who, at a conference in 2005, was adamant that he would never confess what he had done, for fear of how the revelation would destroy his relationships with family, friends, and neighbors. For a demonstration of what perpetrators might have to lose in telling the truth in Northern Ireland—and of what can go wrong in the telling of it—see David Park’s fine new novel, *The Truth Commissioner* (2008). This, of course, is fiction; but being good fiction, it is plausible.


13 Am I being sentimental here? After all, among the Republican dead there will be some who allowed themselves to become vicious, sadistic thugs. The same will be true, of course, of the Loyalist dead. However, perhaps less easy for some of us to concede, the same will be true of the dead among the security services. All armies and police forces contain bullies who like violence much more than they should (which is not at all to say that all soldiers and police are violent bullies). It follows that among those whose names run down the memorials to the British dead of the two world wars will be those of people who did unspeakable things and felt no remorse. If it helps, one may add that the same will be true of memorials to the American, Australian, and Canadian dead, too. We can be sure, too, that it was true of the Roman dead; and had the Romans been wont to record in stone the names of their fallen legionnaires, maybe somewhere in the sands of what is now Israel, there would be a memorial to the thugs who drove nails into the hands and feet of a certain Galilean artisan with grandiose religious pretensions. If so, then these would be the thugs of whom Luke’s Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). This is a very emotionally difficult matter, but one that deserves attention; and I owe thanks to David Armstrong—who served with the Royal Ulster Constabulary for eleven years in the middle of the Troubles—for urging me to attend to it.

14 To be exact, in July 2002 Maskey laid a wreath in remembrance of Irish soldiers who died in the First World War, in advance of the main public ceremony, which he declined to attend since he regarded it as a commemoration of the Battle of the Somme.

15 McEvoy 2006, 97 n. 251: “Maskey’s initiative…was described by the strident anti-republican critic Kevin Myers as ‘generous and courageous.’” How “strident” one finds Myers probably depends on how much sympathy one has for the target of his criticism. Since I lack much sympathy, I find Myers merely and appropriately relentless.