

Forgiving abuse - An ethical critique

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In 1989 I became associated with a group of young women who brought a complaint of sexual harassment and abuse, in accordance with the formal procedures of the church, against a prominent church leader in Australia. Rather than implement formal disciplinary proceedings as the regulations required, the church leaders put the women's complaint in a drawer and proceeded as if a formal complaint did not exist. Instead, they advised the minister to resign from the parish and seek counselling.

The minister was allowed to announce his resignation to the congregation himself. He presented the reasons in vague terms as an act of faith in moving into an uncertain future. Though no longer minister of the parish, the minister continued to live in the parish, conducted weddings, visited people, served on church committees and represented the church on community bodies.

The women were invited to meet with the state committee responsible for dealing with complaints against clergy. The women responded, thinking they were giving evidence in support of their complaint. Unbeknown to them, however, many of the committee had not been made aware by church leaders that the women had lodged a formal complaint, and were acting on the basis that their purpose was to gather information to determine the type of counselling the minister needed.

The minister's sudden and unexplained resignation created grief and uncertainty in the congregation, leading to rumours spreading about the behaviour of "certain women" as being responsible. Efforts by the women to clarify what was happening to their complaint were fruitless. Eventually one of the women confronted the man in charge of collecting the evidence and elicited from him that the church had never recognised them as formal complainants. The church was not acting on a complaint, he said - they were simply counselling a minister with a problem. When challenged on this, he spat in her face the words, "You are wrathful women!"

Becoming aware of their disenfranchisement, the women lodged a second complaint, naming additional charges, this time with the support of two male clergy (!). On receiving this second complaint, the church leaders realised they could no longer keep it hidden and advised the minister to resign from the ministry. Formal disciplinary procedures that were required to be followed were delayed for several months to enable the minister to do so. The best the women and their supporters were able to do was force a minimal acknowledgement in the minister's resignation of the complaint laid against him.

Fourteen months after they lodged a formal complaint, the women received a letter stating that as the minister was no longer a minister of the church, no action could be taken on their complaint. Because the charges against

the minister and his acknowledgement of them were never made public, the minister continued to serve as a church representative on a community ethics committee and was subsequently employed by another church body.

The congregation suffered immensely during this time, with responsibility for this damage being laid largely at the feet of the women. Two women were subsequently removed as elders of the church, one of whom had little knowledge of the complaint but objected to the manner in which it was handled in the congregation. All of the women left the congregation.

The support group formed by the women during this process – called SHIVERS¹ – remained active for a number of years. It was the first and one of the few support groups in Australia for adult victims of abuse and violence within religious communities. It provided support for a number of other women lodging complaints and a safe haven for women from around the country to share their stories of abuse and violence for the first time. Though having no formal recognition and no institutional support, its educational materials, community workshops, and lobbying activities were significant factors in churches in Australia beginning to recognise the reality of abusive clergy and lay leaders and belatedly adopting protocols in the mid 1990's to address the issue (though the protocols subsequently adopted were criticised by SHIVERS as inadequate in both framework and process).

I was one of two men associated with SHIVERS. My exposure to the trauma and injustice that results from clergy abuse through the group challenged the theological frameworks that up to that point had served me well. People as diverse as George Comstock (Comstock 1976) in the area of social policy and Thomas Kuhn (Kuhn 1970) in the area of philosophy of science have noted that people and societies do not dismantle their operating systems quickly or easily. The crucial factor for me was listening to the experiences of the women who crossed SHIVERS' path: experiences of abuse, violence and exploitation by religious leaders; and subsequent experiences of blame, ostracism and injustice as they sought to have those experiences recognised and addressed.

I came to identify this process of rethinking with Letty Russell's methodology of the theological spiral.² Within this method of theological construction, theological thought is seen as emerging out of an ongoing spiral of interaction, involving:

1. a commitment with those who are struggling for justice and full humanity;
2. a sharing of experiences of struggle in a concrete context of engagement;
3. critical analysis of the context of the experience;
4. producing a contextual examination of biblical and church traditions producing new insights;

5. leading to further action, celebration and reflection within an ongoing spiral. (Russell 1993, p.31)

I became aware that a recurring theme in the experiences of many women survivors of sexual abuse and violence within religious communities is the pressure placed on them to resolve the situation “they were in” by forgiving the person who had abused them without any effort on the hearer’s part to address the damage and danger that abuse involves.

I presented an address questioning interpretations and misuses of forgiveness at a National Resource and Training Seminar on Sexual Assault organised by the Royal Women’s Hospital in Melbourne in 1993. The paper was widely requested and was reprinted the following year as an occasional paper (Horsfield 1994). I have received more responses to that paper than to anything I’ve ever written.³ The response and the further stories that were written to me have confirmed for me that the ways in which the concept and practice of forgiveness is commonly constructed, communicated and interpreted within many Christian churches is misguided and inadequate for addressing the psychic, social and spiritual practicalities faced by women, and probably also for men, who have been sexually assaulted.

Dominant misconceptions about forgiveness

There are a number of common ideas and practices of forgiveness that are challenged by the nature and experience of sexual assault.

One is that forgiveness is *the* Christian response to harm done by one person to another. Inherent in this is a strongly rationalist or cognitive expectation that a woman who has been sexually assaulted should be able simply to decide by an act of conscious choice to forget she has been assaulted and carry on her life as if nothing has happened.

Underlying this expectation is the theological belief that the grace of God or the power of the Spirit can override any human feelings or memories and in effect recreate a prior naivety or innocence. Commonly quoted when this expectation is made is the biblical passage: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.” (II Cor. 5:17) A woman who is “unforgiving” for whatever reason poses a threat to this belief.

Once one constructs forgiveness as a “good” and possible thing, a number of consequences follow. The woman’s recalcitrance is frequently dealt with by attempting to change the woman’s will by prayer, counselling, or even exorcism. If these don’t work, the threat posed by the woman is managed by constructing her as deviant, vengeful or lacking faith or grace, commonly leading to her ostracism from the faith community.

This construction of “unforgiveness” as deviance can be subtle and sophisticated. A recent psychological-theological text on forgiveness presents an extensive treatment of what it called “grudge” theory, in effect an analysis of “the appeal and the potential (or perceived) benefits of holding a grudge.” (Baumeister, Juola Exline et al. 1998) A further exploration of grudge theory in the same text suggests that unforgiveness may have a neurological foundation, a suggestion made on the basis of research of fear conditioning in rats! (Worthington 1998)

Associated with this idea are both secular and religious idealisations of forgiveness and reconciliation as *the highest aspirations* in situations of offence.

In Christian discourse, forgiveness is frequently presented as more than a personal responsive act, but as the proactive duty of every Christian as a means of participating in the mission of God. Commonly quoted in this affirmation is the Pauline passage: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” (II Cor. 5:18-19) Forgiveness in this discourse is seen not just as a matter of individual choice but as emblematic, as in the following:

“Forgiveness is not merely one choice among a host of Christian themes ... Forgiveness is rather Christian faith itself – whole, complete.” (Barber 1991)

Forgiveness is at times given similar treatment in secular discourse as well, an ideal that by its idealism diminishes other responses to grievance. So,

“Yet despite all the confusions which reduce forgiveness to amnesty or to amnesia, to acquittal or prescription, to the work of mourning or some political therapy of reconciliation; in short to some historical ecology, it must never be forgotten, nevertheless, that all of that refers to a certain idea of pure and unconditional forgiveness, without which this discourse would not have the least meaning.” (Derrida 2001, p.44)

A further misconception is the view that forgiveness is an effective tool for setting a victim of sexual abuse on the road to recovery from the effects of the abuse. As a consequence of this view, many women find themselves pressured to forgive their assaulter as a solution to their problems: long before they are ready and generally long before the wrong that has been done to them has been acknowledged and addressed.

A number of clinical psychologists in recent years have taken up this view of forgiveness as a unilateral therapeutic device, of concern only to the individual who has experienced the assault. In order to produce the effects, a number of writers have developed strategies for inducing an assumed state of forgiveness as a way of gaining its potential psychological benefits.

So Everett Worthington proposes what he calls a “Pyramid model of forgiveness,” an “intervention program that has promoted forgiveness in people who have experienced hurts.” (Worthington 1998, pp.107-8). The model is independent of any ethical or communal framework, and involves self-generated psychological actions such as (1) Recall the hurt; (2) Empathise with the one who hurt you; (3) Induction of a state of humility; (4) Make a public commitment to forgive; (5) Hold onto forgiveness. In this normative model, unforgiveness is understood as a psychological fear reaction producing negative responses: “The Pyramid Model of Forgiveness is based on an understanding of unforgiveness as a fear-based secondary emotion that motivates avoidance and revenge.” (p.132)

The Learn Well Forgiveness Center offers online courses and resources in forgiveness.⁴ Courses include “Forgiveness therapy,” “Forgiveness skills,” and “Forgiveness Index.” The five steps they propose are: (1) Acknowledge the anger; (2) Bar revenge; (3) Consider the offender's perspective; (4) Decide to accept the hurt; (5) Extend compassion and good-will to the offender. The effect of these, it guarantees, is “to release the offended from the offence.”

What is characteristic of each of these is that, in a framework constrained by the four walls of the psychological consulting room, they ignore any ethical or communal dimension of responsibility in assault and place responsibility for resolving the effects of the assault solely on the individual who has been subject to the abuse.

A fourth misconception is that forgiveness is unconditional. It is to be given without any strings attached, irrespective of whether the perpetrator of the assault has acknowledged their wrong, irrespective of whether their abusive behaviour has been stopped so that others will not be similarly hurt, and irrespective of whether any process of remediation has taken place. The idea also emerges in Christian piety that forgiving an offender before any process of accountability is enacted, will cause the offender to change by the overwhelmingness of the love they're being shown by the person they have harmed.

Underlying this misconception is the theological view of the undeserved love of God as the motivation for Christian belief, devotion and practice. Theological echoes of the Augustine-Pelagian theological controversy over faith and works, and the Lutheran concern for salvation by grace alone, underlie the resistance to any attempt to suggest that there are conditions that need to be met before forgiveness is appropriate.

Though he acknowledges qualifications, Derrida sees this unconditionality of forgiveness as one of its essential characteristics:

“It is important to analyse at its base the tension at the heart of the heritage between, *on the one side*, the idea which is also a demand for the *unconditional*, gracious, infinite, aneconomic forgiveness granted to *the guilty as guilty*, without counterpart even to those who do not repent or ask forgiveness, and *on the other side*,

as a great number of texts testify through many semantic refinements and difficulties, a conditional forgiveness proportionate to recognition of the fault, to repentance, to the transformation of the sinner who then explicitly asks forgiveness... Must one not maintain that an act of forgiveness worthy of its name, if there ever is such a thing, must forgive the unforgivable, and without condition?... Even if this radical purity can seem excessive, hyperbolic, mad?" (Derrida 2001, pp. 34, 39)

Do victims of abuse retain moral agency?

A key issue in challenging these dominant ideas as misconceptions is the question of whether women who have first-hand experience of sexual assault are seen as agents of moral and theological discernment.

It seems at first to be a superfluous question - of course they do, most would readily argue. But when one listens to the stories of the ways in which women who are sexually assaulted or abused are subsequently treated, it becomes clear that *in practice* women who have been subject to sexual assault are frequently treated as though their personal testimony is no longer trustworthy, their judgment is impaired, and their insights questionable.

There are a number of deeply held cultural and patriarchal views about the nature of women's sexuality and the reliability of women's testimony that need to be explicitly challenged in order to identify the contribution that women's experience may make to a rethinking of the ideology of forgiveness.

Within the terms of Letty Russell's theological spiral (Russell 1993), what if the authorities on what Christian forgiveness means and how it is to be practised are *not* the male theologians or philosophers writing from their privileged positions of tenure in city universities; nor the psychologists writing from their positions of professional detachment in comfortably paid suburban practices; but those women nurtured within the Christian faith over decades, who are then thrust into a real-life situation in which they have the first hand information for determining what is the appropriate Christian response to this situation?

What if, when women survivors of abuse say they are not able to forgive, they are not being weak, aberrant, or damaged, to be quarantined through prayer or counselling until they have recovered normality; but are reflecting a profound insight into the essential nature of Christian forgiveness. What if, in the terms of Letty Russell's theological methodology, their experience has given them a context by which to see that the common understandings of forgiveness reflected within churches are a patriarchal aberration of Christian theology that urgently needs correction?

If one takes seriously the context of women's experience of sexual assault, a critical deconstruction and reconstruction of the nature of forgiveness begins to take place.

Deconstruction

In addition to the misconceptions highlighted above, a critical view of forgiveness exposes a number of hidden agendas and motives.

One is that Christian forgiveness is often used as a way of avoiding unpleasanties. Much of middle-class western Christianity is about niceness: constructing and maintaining an attractive community of friendly people as a basis for growing churches by attracting other people into a conflict-free shelter from a raging and at times threatening world. Quick forgiveness of “unpleasanties” helps keep Christian communities nice – quickly.

Church leaders often use forgiveness as a tool for settling abuse situations as quickly and easily as possible to avoid scandal, conflict and disruption to institutional programs, to spare them from having to confront or oppose a powerful and threatening person, to avoid possible legal action, and to avoid having to face up to injustice and abuse in churches’ own structures.

Church members often put pressure on victims of assault to “forgive and forget” quickly because the assault makes them feel uneasy, they don’t want to keep hearing about things that are unpleasant (once survivors of abuse and injustice begin talking, they can often want to talk about it a lot) and they find it difficult to handle the demanding emotional responses and the hard practical and faith questions those who have been assaulted begin to ask.

Women themselves may also want to forgive quickly for a number of reasons: as a way of bargaining for mercy and safety from the threat of their assaulter; to avoid facing up to the full vulnerability and implications of what has happened to them; because they feel that is what their faith requires them to do even though their bodies say otherwise; because they realise they risk ostracism from their own communities if they don’t; and because they fear being labelled psychologically if they don’t act according to expectation (e.g. behaving like a “victim” rather than a “survivor”).

Therapists can urge forgiveness on clients because it seems to offer a way for the individual to deal with the consequences of an action when there are no supporting social structures of accountability, redress and restoration and affirmation of the person and their experience within a understanding community.

Theologians have a vested interest in promoting forgiveness because they see it as a central Christian doctrine (and, surreptitiously, as a central plank of an ideological framework and cultural institutional practices that justify and support their status). To say that women’s experience of sexual assault gives the woman a distinctive moral and theological agency that may challenge the opinions of male theologians poses a threat to the established order of theological authority.

Reconstruction

Forgiveness, when genuinely given and experienced, and when the conditions are right, can bring liberation to both giver and receiver that is inestimable. However, I consider that much of our thinking and practices of forgiveness has been separated from an ethical framework that is essential if it is to have meaning. I suggest that Christian thinking about forgiveness needs to recover a number of emphases if its practice is to be meaningful, protective and effective.

The recovery of forgiveness as an ethical action

Much is written about the theological nature of forgiveness (Telfer 1959; Heyward 1987; Blumenthal 1993; Jones 1995; Muller-Fahrenholz 1996), and an increasing amount is being written about the psychological aspects of forgiveness (Simon and Simon 1990; Flanigan 1992; Dowrick 1997; Worthington 1998). But little is being written about forgiveness as an ethical concept. Where it is, much of it is so complex and abstract as to be of little use in determining whether forgiveness in any situation is an ethical action, and therefore an effective and theological one.⁵

By ethics I do not mean a legalistic framework. Nor do I mean a retributive framework that does not permit gratuity or grace. Ethos is the characteristic spirit, tone, beliefs, values and practices of a particular community that gives meaning and shape to people's lives. Ethos provides the framework for integration of the various dimensions of our experience into a meaningful individual and social identity. It is the ethos of communities to which we belong that generates shared hopes and commitments, that undergirds altruism and sharing, and that binds people together in trustful community relationships. Ethos is not necessarily a conscious thing: we carry it in our being - it shapes our identity, it reverberates in our emotional being, it sets the framework of health and sickness.

Ethics is the outworking of ethos in terms of practical rules of behaviour. It is a central aspect of the Christian ethos that inward faith ideas and experiences are expressed in outward moral behaviour. So a central part of Christianity is not just ideas but also corresponding ethical qualities such as respect, honesty, acting justly, acting with love, being fair, and honouring commitments, to name several.

The practice of forgiveness is more than just the psychological action of an individual: it is an individual action that takes its meaning from the ethos of the communities within which the person belongs. Along with pastoral theologian Don Browning, I believe that in our current situation, much of our thinking about what forgiveness is has become "unethical," i.e. separated from the ethos of its origins and from the communal context within which it has meaning. Browning writes,

“Without assuming the seriousness of the demand of Christianity for ethical inquiry and conduct, forgiveness loses its meaning and its renewing power... It is only against the background of the tenacious concern to define in practical ways and with great attention to detail the meaning of the law that the gospel of forgiveness has power.” (Browning, p.102)

Discerning whether one should forgive or not, therefore, involves consideration not only of whether it would feel good, solve some of my psychological problems, or make things easier. Determining whether to forgive or not involves discernment about the meaning of the offence within the ethos of the community: the individual and communal meanings of other actions that are available for responding to the offence; the individual and communal meanings of foregoing those other actions; and the individual and communal meanings of particular actions for my place and worth within the ethos of the community. So Jeffrie Murphy writes:

“Forgiveness is not always a virtue, however. Indeed, if I am correct in linking resentment to self-respect, a too ready tendency to forgive may properly be regarded as a vice because it may be a sign that one lacks respect for oneself.... Forgiveness may indeed restore relationships, but to seek restoration at all cost - even at the cost of one’s very human dignity - can hardly be a virtue. And, in intimate relationships, it can hardly be true love or friendship either...When we are willing to be doormats for others, we have, not love, but rather what the psychiatrist Karen Horney calls ‘morbid dependency.’ If I count morally as much as anyone else (as surely I do), a failure to resent moral injuries done to me is a failure to care about the moral value incarnate in my own person...and thus a failure to care about the very rules of morality.” (Murphy and Hampton 1988, p.18)

I perceive that in many cases where survivors of sexual abuse are pressured to forgive, it has as much to do with reinforcing patriarchal subordination of women as moral agents, and expecting women to take their place, than it has to do with encouraging appropriate Christian action. In this context, withholding forgiveness may be a more ethical Christian action and should be encouraged by the wider community in favour of forgiving. John Stoltenberg in his book *Refusing to be a man* gives an instance of a young woman, gang-raped at the age of 14. “I forgave them immediately,” she said later. “I felt like it was my fault that I’d been raped. I said, well, they’re men. They just can’t help themselves.” (Stoltenberg 1989, p.20) It is possible to imagine many Christian communities holding the woman up as a shining example of piety for her readiness to forgive. From an ethical perspective, however, to permit or support this young woman to forgive would be to support her view that she was of no worth and that men were not responsible for what they had done. Such unethical forgiveness would be an acquiescence and exploitation in the face of destructive evil. It would also reinforce a dangerous vulnerability in the young woman herself.

In similar vein novelist Joyce Carol Oates notes the important ethical function of forgiveness and unforgiveness through one of her characters in her novel *We were the Mulvaney*s:

“Patrick said of Marianne she didn’t know, or didn’t want to know, when she was being exploited. She didn’t know what evil was. She cheated herself of knowing because she forgave too soon.” (Oates 1996, p.266)

A consideration of the ethical implications of forgiveness and unforgiveness is beginning to be undertaken in the secular community in a wide range of social situations, such as Christina Montiel’s analysis of forgiveness in socio-political situations (Montiel 2000), M. Kurzynski’s analysis of applications of forgiveness in personnel management (Kurzynski 1998), Jacques Derrida’s previously mentioned analysis of forgiveness in social and political situations (Derrida 2001), and Archbishop Tutu’s *No future without forgiveness* (Tutu 1999).

A number of writers on forgiveness, particularly within a psychological framework, make the point that forgiving an action doesn’t mean condoning that action. However in practice this is generally interpreted as denoting internal attitude and perception – rarely are guidelines given by which to distinguish the difference between forgiveness as an action and its character as condonation. How does one distinguish practically between an act of forgiveness and an act of acquiescence to dominating individual and cultural damage and injustice? I would argue that not condoning an action needs to be expressed in the discernment of appropriate action, not just in intellectual assumption.

An ethical act of forgiveness needs to give attention first to crucial things such as whether the dignity and integrity of those who have been violated has been protected and restored; whether effective structures have been put in place for ensuring the safety and protection of other vulnerable people; whether there has been a clear affirmation of ethical expectations for fair relations between people of inequitable power; and whether legal and moral obligations have been met.

Set in this context, one should be alert to signals from survivors of assault that they cannot forgive. Baumeister et al, quoted earlier, would brand this as the woman holding a grudge, and would provide neuro-physiological arguments for her “weakness” in doing so (Baumeister, Juola Exline et al. 1998). But if one views forgiveness as an ethical issue, and women as moral agents, their action can be seen in a totally different light. It is not that the woman is holding a grudge, but rather that they take seriously the values by which we are urged to live. If these values are not affirmed or upheld by the broader community, the individual is placed in a situation where they cannot forgive without either denying their own worth or truth, giving in to the violence, denying the value of that which has been violated, or dehumanising their assaulter.

In contrast to so-called grudge theory, I consider the refusal to forgive may be seen equally as an individual’s refusal to give in to the destruction of ethos with one of the only resources they have available to them: withholding of their approval.

Forgiveness has communal dimensions, not just individual ones

A second crucial element is that forgiveness needs to be lifted out of an individual framework into a communal one. To a certain extent this is covered in affirming that forgiveness is an ethical concept, not just a psychological or theological one. An ethical framework affirms that actions are to be understood, not only in terms of individual effect, but in relation to the shared meanings that are constructed and nurtured within communities of interpretation. If an ethos is to mean anything, it needs to include processes whereby the values of the communal ethos are protected against behaviours that contradict them.

Within Christian communities of interpretation, leaders not only interpret the ethos of a community, they also represent it. When Christian leaders fail to act in situations of sexual abuse or violence within religious communities, they create a crisis of integrity. Abuse by a powerful person of others requires prompt, decisive and ethical action by other leaders to protect the integrity of the ethos by denouncing the abusive behaviour, affirming the value of those who were abused, holding the abusive person accountable, and restoring trust by restoring the fortune and rights of anybody who suffered because of the breakdown of the system.

Because it is largely an individual-oriented profession, psychological therapy tends to ignore the communal dimension of an experience such as abuse and deals with it within the terms of the effect it has had on the individual. Its focus is on the intra-psychic dynamics of the issue, dynamics that are accessible to the therapist – not redressing the communal betrayal aspect of the experience, which is beyond the bounds of the therapy session. Psychiatrist Judith Herman sees this a-ethical stance of psychological therapy as totally inadequate in responding to victims of sexual abuse:

“All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain... Working with victimised people requires a committed moral stance... a position of solidarity with the victim. This does not mean a simplistic notion that the victim can do no wrong; rather, it involves an understanding of the fundamental injustice of the traumatic experience and the need for a resolution that restores some sense of justice.” (Herman 1992, p.135)

Psychological therapy has tended to see forgiveness as a device for psychological alleviation of symptoms rather than as an ethical issue. The basis on which healing is expected to take place is to help the person understand why this situation has happened, what its effects have been on them, and then working to dissolve those effects psychologically in individual therapy. Techniques of forgiveness are “taught” in order to achieve the alleviation of psychological symptoms.

In an ethical framework, sexual abuse is seen as a problem of the community. Sexual abuse is a situation in which one of the community members has been wrongly treated by another member of the community. Response to sexual assault therefore needs to address the issue communally: what does the community need to

do to rectify this situation, to ensure that those who have suffered because of abuse within the community are given what they need to recover from that abuse, to have their fortune and place within the community restored, and to ensure that other members of the community are free from similar behaviour?

The importance of community is stressed as foundational to justice-making and forgiveness in the work of the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence. But in my experience the failure to deal with sexual abuse communally is one of the major areas where survivors of abuse feel let down by their religious communities. Judith Herman among others notes that a crucial factor in recovering from abuse or trauma is to have the truth of what has happened recognised by one's community of reference, and incorporated as reality into the meaning and ethos of the community. (Herman 1992, p.135) We do this in other situations such as good achievements, struggle, death - individual experience is responded to communally and becomes part of the shared life of the community. But in the case of sexual abuse, members of religious communities at times often go to extraordinary lengths to avoid taking a stance and giving the survivor's experience any opportunity for communal validation and support. Efforts are made to keep the survivor's experience individualised and to surround it with secrecy and suspicion - resulting in a literal shunning by her community and isolation at a time of greatest need.

It is in this context that we can best understand the comment sometimes made by church leaders that survivors of clergy abuse are never happy or that you can never please them. I don't believe that's the case. What I have observed rather is that people who were abused within a religious community expected quite rightly that the community would respond in terms of the ethos the community has been taught to live by. They are commonly shocked and disoriented to find that this doesn't happen. The problem here is not that survivors of abuse are hard to please - it is that the way in which the community and its leaders respond to abuse when it occurs is not in line with the ethos that is preached or taught.

The issue of power

A third area where thinking about forgiveness is deficient is in its failure to address sufficiently seriously the structural inequalities of gender relations within society, and between perpetrator and victim. In practice, this power imbalance results in expectations and the costs of forgiveness falling disproportionately on women.

The relative power of relationships between different people and different social groups becomes a powerful agent in how the issue is understood and the rules that apply to it. Power is central to understanding not only the mechanics, but also the meaning of sexual assault within our society. Jeffrie Murphy identifies this character of assault well:

“One reason we so deeply resent moral injuries done to us is not simply that they hurt us in some tangible or sensible way; it is because such injuries are also messages - symbolic communications. They are ways a wrongdoer has of saying to us, ‘I count but you do not,’ ‘I can use you for my purposes,’ or ‘I am here up high and you are there down below.’ Intentional wrongdoing insults us and attempts (sometimes successfully) to degrade us - and thus it involves a kind of injury that is not merely tangible and sensible. It is a moral injury, and we care about such injuries... Most of us tend to care about what others (at least some others, some significant group whose good opinion we value) think about us - how much they think we matter. Our self-respect is social in at least this sense, and it is simply part of the human condition that we are weak and vulnerable in these ways. And thus when we are treated with contempt by others it attacks us in profound and deeply threatening ways.” (Murphy and Hampton 1988, p.25)

I contend that in general, people with power and resources within the society tend to resolve offences done to them by demanding recognition and obtaining justice and restitution. They support this action on the practical grounds that an uncorrected offence weakens their social stature and position and on the ethical grounds that if a person is allowed to get away with such wrong-doing, the moral structure of society will be diminished.

In general, those people within the community with less structural power and practical resources are required, even pressured, to resolve offences by forgiving them. To a certain extent this is because they lack the social power to muster community opinion in their support, and to muster community support in counteracting the tactical evasion of their offender. Judith Herman identifies how this social power works in assault situations:

“Genuine contrition in a perpetrator is a rare miracle... In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator’s first line of defence. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens. To this end, he marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalisation. After every atrocity, one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail.” (Herman 1992, p.8)

In any situation of forgiveness, therefore, the process of ethical discernment needs to address seriously the relationships of power involved in the situation. The issue of discrepancies of power and their significance in resolution of abusive situations is well brought out in what is called the “Kairos document,” a theological statement produced as a basis for action against apartheid in South Africa. Its statements about Christian stances towards apartheid may well be applied to stances towards other abusive behaviour:

“Church theology often describes the Christian stance of reconciliation in the following way: “We must be fair. We must listen to both sides of the story. If the two sides can only meet to talk and negotiate they will sort out their differences and misunderstandings, and the conflict will be resolved.” On the face of it this may sound very Christian. But is it?

The fallacy here is that ‘reconciliation’ has been made into an absolute principle that must be applied in all cases of conflict or dissension. But not all cases of conflict are the same. We can imagine a private quarrel between two people or two groups whose differences are based upon misunderstandings. In such cases it would be appropriate to talk and negotiate to sort out the misunderstandings and to reconcile the two sides. But there are other conflicts in which one side is right and the other wrong. There are conflicts where one side is a fully armed and violent oppressor while the other side is defenceless and oppressed. There are conflicts that can only be described as the struggle between justice and injustice, good and evil, God and the devil. To speak of reconciling these two is not only a mistaken application of the Christian idea of reconciliation; it is total betrayal of all that Christian faith has ever meant.”(Kairos Theologians 1985, pp.8-9)

Communal forgiveness: The Samoan *Ifonga*

A good way to explore forgiveness as an ethical practice as discussed above is to look at the traditional Samoan practice of *Ifonga*. Though now significantly integrated into the more formal legal system, it illustrates a communal and ethical perspective on rectification and forgiveness. The outline of this practice as it was related to me is as follows.

If a member of a community offends a member of another community, the offence is handled between community leaders, not between the individuals themselves. This in itself involves a recognition that offence is a communal matter, not just a matter between individuals. The leader of the offending group goes personally and sits outside the home of the leader of the offended group, covering himself with an expensive fine mat – thereby hiding his individuality and embodying his representative office and practically humiliating himself in symbolic restitution of the humiliation that the offended people have experienced.

Members of the offended community are then given opportunity to express their emotions to the representative under the mat - rage, shame, embarrassment at the way they were treated. They are permitted to address the leader under the mat, including yelling, jumping on the ground, hitting the ground, but not touching him. Incorporated in the act of reconciliation therefore is a structured way for those who have been hurt to express the emotions that have arisen from the way they were treated, giving the people who have been most directly offended a chance to express their personal stake in the offence. In this way, the offence which has been

done to individual people within the group is acknowledged and opportunity given for them to have the offence they have suffered communally affirmed, and their continuing value to the community affirmed and restored.

This expression of emotions continues until the leader of the offended group discerns that sufficient time has passed for the community to give voice to their emotional reactions to the offence that was done. For serious cases, the leader or community representative (who himself didn't do anything wrong) may be covered and subject to emotional harangue for days.

When the leader of the offended group has decided that emotions have been sufficiently expressed, he walks to the other leader, removes the mat (which he keeps as a gift of reconciliation), and invites him into his hut. Over kava (a drink of community) the two leaders discuss what other action is required to redress the wrong that has been done, determine if compensation is necessary, and restore bonds between the communities.

After the process is over, the leader of the offending community returns home. There he then takes his own action to remonstrate against and punish the individual wrong-doer, for whom he as leader is responsible, whose actions have brought the whole community into disrepute and caused the leader of the community such loss of face and humiliation.

It is enlightening to compare this communal response to wrong-doing, forgiveness and restoration to what is commonly experienced by women who are sexually assaulted by church leaders. Rarely does a person of leadership and authority within the church take on the woman's cause: the woman generally is required to handle the matter herself. Most bishops and superintendents have even tended to avoid being exposed personally to the experiences of victims of clergy abuse. This means they have little first hand experience with the real consequences of abusive behaviour on those who are the victims of it.

The primary focus of most bishops and superintendents has tended to be on protecting the interests of their institutions. Unlike as occurs in the *Ifonga*, most bishops or superintendents of offending clergymen accept no personal responsibility for their behaviour. In fact the opposite has often been the case – bishops and superintendents frequently go to extreme lengths to distance themselves from any responsibility for clergy under their jurisdiction. This has included in Australia Catholic bishops arguing legally, in contradiction of their theology, that priests do not represent the church. This may be legally pragmatic in the short term, but it fails to do justice and in the long term it has been seriously undermining the integrity of the institution and the fundamental teachings of the faith, leading to diminishing public respect and member loyalty. I believe in the long term it is also a more expensive way of dealing with the issue.

In contrast to the *Ifonga*, women who have been sexually abused within religious communities are rarely given opportunity to express the emotional impact of what has been done to them before the whole community.

Likewise, congregations who have been betrayed by the actions of an abusive leader, are rarely given an opportunity to express the emotional responses that come with that betrayal. The expression of most emotions is tightly controlled in most religious community gatherings. Feelings of rage, embarrassment, disappointment, misunderstanding, betrayal, revenge or shame are rarely publicly expressed or dealt with. More commonly the woman is shunned by her community or she is pressured to forgive so that the matter can be quickly pushed away. The failure to give congregations opportunity to deal with the emotional consequences of betrayal commonly forces those emotions inward into sabotaging or divisive behaviour, frequently resulting in destructive divisions and scapegoating within the community.

Forgiveness is an ethical issue, not just a psychological or theological one. Discerning and acting on what is required for doing justice on behalf of victims in situations of assault and abuse, though often difficult in the immediate situation, is the most faithful response to make. In the long term, it is the best way of laying a foundation for recovery for the victim, the most effective way of preventing further damage within the community, and the most durable way of restoring damage that has been done.

¹ Standing for “Sexual Harassment Is Violence; Effective Redress Stops it.”

² A method which Beverly Harrison calls a “liberation social ethics methodology” and Katie Cannon calls “emancipatory praxis.”

³ *Alive Now*, the U.S. United Methodist Communications publication reprinted it the following year. A number of therapists in Australia and New Zealand have asked permission to photocopy it to give to clients. A church elder in Minnesota asked permission to copy it to distribute through her church and to her Council of Bishops. A social worker working in a prison rehabilitation program, from which church chaplains had been banned because their loving assurances prevented prisoners from accepting responsibility for their actions, asked permission to reproduce and use the paper with the prisoners. I continued to receive letters from around Australia up to five years later from women telling me how much they appreciated the paper and telling me their story of abuse within a church and invariably the failure of church leaders to deal with it effectively.

⁴ <http://www.forgiver.net>

⁵ A good example of this is L. Gregory Jones’ text, *Embodying forgiveness*. Jones attempts a detailed evaluation of different perspectives on forgiveness, presenting his own understanding of forgiveness as “not so much a word spoken, an action performed, or a feeling felt as it is an embodied way of life in an ever-deepening friendship with the Triune God and with others” (p.xii). Though he identifies a range of issues involved in thinking about forgiveness, after reading the book it is extremely difficult to remember exactly what has been said or how one would apply it to a situation one encounters. I would argue that this complexity and abstraction, that frequently characterises theological reflection, does not further or clarify understanding, but has contributed to the ambiguity around forgiveness. This creates a practical situation in which those with power impose the understanding and practice that serves their interests.

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