
Sociopolitical Forgiveness

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After episodes of political violence, memories of past atrocities prevent the healing of ruptured relations between adversarial groups. Can human processes, studied and developed in the context of personal well-being and interpersonal relationships, take on a sociopolitical character and contribute to post-conflict healing? The following explores the processes of public forgiveness, apology, justice, and reconciliation as instruments for social healing.

Forgiveness involves a combination of thinking and feeling processes. On the cognitive level, one ceases negative judgments about the perceived transgressor, while the emotional aspect of forgiveness causes one's resentment to fade away. Forgiveness entails remembering, not forgetting, the unjust act. But the remembrance is experienced without bitterness, and in order to restore justice.

Forgiveness exists on at least two distinct planes: the personal/private and the sociopolitical/public level. Privately, forgiveness is a subjective experience that takes place within an individual and between two people. Sociopolitical forgiveness operates among and between large groups of persons, not individuals or pairs. Much of the published forgiveness discourse addresses private forgiveness; ideas and practices for public forgiveness in the social arena must also be developed.

Sociopolitical forgiveness occurs when a whole group of offended people engages in the forgiveness process in relation to another group that is perceived to have caused a social offense. Public forgiveness takes place in the domain of a conflictual inter-group relationship, not an interpersonal one. Public forgiveness requires sensitivity to the historical, cultural, and political contexts of both conflicting groups. Because of its context sensitivity, there is no unitary formula for public forgiveness, except perhaps a respect for pluralism and local experimentation.

Collective forgiveness arises along with cultural transformations. Atmospheres of revenge and bitterness gradually give way to increased trust and acceptance of differences. One practical first step toward long-lasting cultural change entails connecting with the collective sorrows and fears brought about by historical conflicts. Furthermore, it is useful to acknowledge that real conditions of social abuse did contribute to the group's shared memories. Not everything is a subjective figment of a community's imagination. Objective conditions of injustice need to cease, or these will aggravate the atmosphere of cultural non-forgiveness.

As a conflict escalates, both sides commit atrocities against members of the Other Group. Although conflict issues are collective in nature, the abuses are highly personalized, with specific transgressors victimizing particular individuals. As the fighting subsides, and calls for communal forgiveness arise, on whom does the challenge of forgiveness fall?

First, it is helpful to differentiate between collective and individual forgiveness. Interpersonal forgiveness for a particular abuse done during violent conflicts is a private experience that depends on the psychological readiness of each victim to cease resentment and condemnation. At the level of individual forgiveness, only the victim can extend forgiveness, and they cannot be represented by anyone else.

The second issue pertains to public forgiveness. Who can forgive the Other Group? Who can engage in sociopolitical forgiveness, and can speak in the name of the wounded group? A forgiving leader's credibility with their people increases if this symbolical person has undergone pained experiences similar to the ones experienced by the collective they claim to represent. Otherwise, those who do not understand the group's deep pains may misperceive calls for forgiveness as pontification.

For example, in the Northern Ireland conflict, there are admirable examples of pained public symbols of forgiveness on both sides. Methodist layperson Gordon Wilson suffered the death of his daughter Marie at an Enniskillen Remembrance Day bombing. Subsequently, he offered words of forgiveness to the bombers, reported worldwide. Michael McGoldrick was brutally murdered near Portadown by loyalist gunmen for no apparent reason other than that he was a Catholic and an easy target. Following his death, his parents talked of praying for his killers and forgiving them. Michael's parents spoke regularly within Protestant and Catholic circles, urging an end to violence and the need for political dialogue.

Social forgiveness should be carefully handled in order to avoid pitfalls that accompany the process. The first danger is pressing the victims to forgive prematurely in order to create a semblance of mass-based societal support for symbolical acts of forgiveness.

Olga Botcharova, a social psychologist who ran conflict resolution programs in Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia, cautions that "the worst mistake the international community can make is to try and press the ethnic communities to please each other by signing a statement of forgiveness without really understanding what it is that they forgive." Botcharova described the fragile subjective conditions of war victims as they deal with issues of forgiveness. She explains how "Sometimes even the slightest suspicion on the part of a victim that s/he might be pressed to forgive may provoke an outburst of resistance. The victim may feel humiliated and abused again (this time, probably, by outsiders of good will). Indeed, who are we to tell the people to forgive? Why should they believe that we could understand the degree of pain they have to cope with since we have never been in their shoes?"

In addition to overburdening the victim, collective forgiveness programs should also be careful not to sideswipe issues of social justice. For example,

offering sociopolitical forgiveness when justice is at its lowest ebb—that is, when abuses are rampant—may merely serve to fortify the social injustice.

What does apology look like on the sociopolitical level? The apology process entails: first, acknowledgement of the transgression; second, feeling and expressing remorse for the wrongful act; and third, doing something to restore that which was wronged. Although apologies may be more commonly linked to the emotional aspects of repentance and sorrow, the other two dimensions of self-acknowledgement and corrective acts are equally important in the apology process.

In *realpolitik*, some conflictual societies have tried to elicit approximations of apologies by offering a lower punishment level for those who admit their wrongdoing. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission granted amnesty to perpetrators who came forward and acknowledged their abusive acts, even if the confessors did not express any remorse for their aggressive behavior. In Rwanda, only those who admitted committing atrocities and expressed remorse received a significantly reduced and guaranteed penalty. In El Salvador, the Jesuit community publicly offered forgiveness to the murderers of six Jesuits only if the killers admitted the truth and expressed remorse.

When analyzing episodes of violence in interpersonal relations, it is not difficult to separate the victim from the perpetrator. Usually, the offended person is in a lower position of power, and suffers significantly more pain than the aggressor. Hence it is clear who the victim is, and who should therefore forgive; it is likewise easy to identify the aggressor, and from whom an apology is wanting. In most escalated large-scale societal conflicts, however, both antagonistic groups receive and give violence, and thus both parties are simultaneously victims and aggressors. Even if both parties engaged in aggressive acts, social apologies rarely occur, for several reasons.

First, both parties tend to perceive themselves as the victims and not the aggressors. Hence, both conflicting groups expect to be offered an apology, instead of initiating an apology themselves. Second, perpetrators seldom believe they have done anything wrong. They see their abuses as part of their duty to their country or ethnic group, and in their minds perceive their acts as righteous behaviors done for a greater good.

Despite the difficulties of getting perpetrators to apologize, social healing requires some semblance of apology from the abusers. On the practical plane of post-conflict reconstruction, abusers who participate in the apology process give an overwhelming amount of secret data that only they themselves know. Without the transgressors' confessions in the post-conflict process, much of the truth of atrocities may remain unavailable to everyone else. Doug Cassell, special counsel to the UN National Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, described the importance of perpetrators' cooperation in getting at the truth. He admitted that "The most important witnesses we had, the most revealing witnesses, the ones who led us to the truth were not the victims and their families, because they did not know the truth. It was instead the people on the inside who came forward."

The enactment of collective apology entails some form of leadership on the side of the group that expresses its public remorse. What kind of leader is

appropriate for collective processes of apology? Individuals who are public symbols and socially influential can appropriately lead others through a process of social apology. A public figure projects greater symbolical power in the apology process if they were previously intertwined with abusive acts at the height of the social conflict.

Vicarious apologies refer to public remorse expressed by a leader who may not have been directly involved in past atrocities. Politicians and religious leaders exemplify social influentials who can initiate public apologies. There may be issues of weak social symbolism for public apologizers who were far removed from the atrocities during the past violence. But the advantages of vicarious apologies may outweigh the handicap of weak symbolism under certain social circumstances. For example, the apologizer need not have been a transgressor in the past conflict, and may therefore find it easier to accept the truth of the atrocities that must be apologized for. Another strength of vicarious apologies comes from the leader's influential position. If they stand in a position of respect and authority within the transgressing group, then the process of cultural transformation in the spirit of collective remorse can advance with greater speed.

Certain risks accompany public apologies. One pitfall, when engaged in collective remorse, is to mix up expectations associated with personal apologies. Although public expressions of remorse tend to proceed at a quicker pace, and help move the social reconstruction process forward, publicized repentances may not be as deep and personally transforming as private apologies. Interpersonal apology emanates from a transgressor to a victim and is given under circumstances of high privacy and psychological freedom, but takes a rather long time to enact due to psychological blocks within the perpetrator. Public apology comes from a known personality—usually a political or religious symbol—or a perpetrator confessing to a public commission. Public remorse is offered under conditionality, as, for example, with expectations of amnesty or lightened judicial sentences.

Even when sociopolitical confessions are given under conditionalities of lightened sentences, transgressors seldom face up to the gravity of their abuses. In various ways, perpetrators continue to refute the extent of their wrongdoing, or withhold repentance. For example, South African security officers denied they instructed their subordinates to kill during the apartheid government. At a special hearing of the Truth Commission, members of the state Security Council claimed that when they used the words “eliminate,” “permanently remove from society,” “neutralize,” or “take out,” all of which are in the Commission's documentation, they never meant “to kill.” Similarly, the Chilean Truth Commission experience showed that “The aggressor has not shown the expected repentance. The Armed Forces see it as (an act of) weakness and culpability.”

Sociopolitical justice refers to a group's receiving fair treatment. In states with mature judiciary systems, justice proceeds by implementing the law through courts. But in societies where judiciary procedures remain ineffective—and many war-devastated groups live under such circumstances—sociopolitical justice and legalism bifurcate into two separate processes.

Distinctions can be made between retributive and restorative justice. Retributive justice refers to something given or demanded to repay a wrong done in the past; its appropriateness is assessed by the extent to which the retributive act measures up to a past wrong. On the other hand, restorative justice pertains to an act that brings back to well-being a person or a society that was damaged by wrongful acts. Restorative justice is future-oriented; its positive contributions are evaluated through the process of individual or social healing. The process of restoring justice may include elements of truth telling, pain reckoning, and punishment, if such actions are required to renew broken relationships in a post-conflict society.

Restorative justice serves the dual purpose of restoring a sense of fairness between victimized individuals and their offenders, and establishing social equity or fairness between groups. Both goals are equally important elements as a society heals itself after years of destructive conflict. Restorative justice excludes social revenge and therefore discourages the eruption of future social conflicts.

War casualties, relatives of victims, political prisoners, and disempowered peoples actively seek justice. Groups marginalized from mainstream political and economic decision making likewise pursue justice. Victims do not always desire revenge. Hence, the image of a vengeful victim may contain more mythical or imagined elements than what exists in real life. Victims desire justice, operationalized as due process and perhaps punishment for perpetrators, but this preference is often unaccompanied by the bitterness and destructiveness of revenge. Rather, victims seek justice in order to heal their wounds. Olga Botcharova worked with those who have suffered through the Bosnian war, and explained,

After injury, pain, and shock are experienced, there is a feeling of severe loss and a common stage of denial, where the reaction is not to look into this pain but to deny it ... it provokes the greatest anger. This anger stays strong and involves everything or everybody associated with the perpetrator ... There is anger towards those who did not experience the same pain, based on the belief that this pain cannot be experienced by anybody else. It is usually amplified by the fact that no justice or very little justice is achieved.

Sociopolitical justice suffers from three possible pitfalls. First, one may fail to distinguish between justice and revenge. Justice seeks to restore fairness for a better future, and is carried out in the spirit of loving forgiveness. It may or may not involve punishment for the aggressor, after some socially and culturally defined due process. But a just punishment is meted out by a public representative, and not by the victim himself or herself. Revenge seeks to return past transgressions, as a victim personally counter-attacks an aggressor, and escalates conflict to higher levels. A vengeful act is unforgiving and bitter. Second, sociopolitical justice often suffers from fast-track methods of exonerating offenders. Transgressors may be pardoned too quickly during hurried efforts to establish just conditions after a conflict. Finally, post-conflict social justice may be limited when the process focuses solely on questions of physical violence, failing to examine issues of economic fairness.

Reconciliation functions as the overriding rubric that integrates the different social ingredients of post-conflict healing—forgiveness, apology, and justice. Sociopolitical reconciliation refers to a restoration of inter-group relationships in a social configuration acceptable to both conflicting parties. Post-conflict reconciled relationships are usually different from pre-conflict conditions. Ideally, restored relations should reflect major transformations that arise as positive effects of the ended conflict.

Differences exist between personal and societal reconciliation. Interpersonal healing takes place between two individuals who were previously involved in a harmful conflictual relationship. On the other hand, societal reconciliation brings together two groups that previously related to each other in a harmful way, and creates positive inter-group relations between them. One or a combination of three concrete social transformations can detect societal reconciliation. These are: first, inter-group acceptance of a common historical interpretation of past conflicts; second, the rise of a strong pluralistic civil society formally recognizing the need to amend past wrongs; and third, groups of people safely returning to their original home territories.

A joint acceptance of historical narratives helps prevent the eruption of future conflicts fueled by collective myths of victimization and societal rage. The joint narrations of a past conflict can point out not only negative memories, but positive memories as well. Pocketed in the shadows of destructive conflicts are true stories of human compassion and justice that transcend conflict boundaries. Such positive narratives can provide the bases for building an atmosphere of collective forgiveness in a post-conflict civil society. But the process of joint history writing is easier said than done. For the victims, recalling painful experiences may reactivate old wounds. For the offenders, accepting transgressions committed is more difficult than denying they ever occurred. Despite the hurdles involved in joint history writing, some societies have experimented with ways to construct shared interpretations of a past conflict. Examples in *realpolitik* are the Truth Commissions in South Africa, Chile, El Salvador and Guatemala, and the proposed cooperative history writing projects among conflicting ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia.

A pluralistic civil society, bent on rectifying social mistakes committed in the past, likewise signals a reconciliatory process. Political dialogue takes center stage within a civil culture of pluralism. Civilian leaders must be ready to listen and speak with the opposing group. Besides a political culture of dialogue, other signs of reconciliatory pluralism include stronger nonviolent methods for resolving differences and government institutions for reconciliation. A political culture of pluralism respects indigenous ways of running social life. This reminder is addressed especially to foreigners who wish to help out in a reconciliation process.

From the perspective of the Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict, for example, one significant sign of social reconciliation involved ethnically different groups of people living together within a single community territory. The back-migration of dislocated peoples signified social reconciliation in the Balkan states.

When the fighting subsides, opportunities for collective reconciliation become available to both conflicting parties. But in wounded societies, who initiates social healing? On the societal level, reconciliation agents are usually influential

religious or political influentials. Reconciliatory leadership requires that one's influence emanates from abilities to persuade one's followers and likewise that leaders speak what is in their followers' hearts. Religious leaders can greatly contribute to collective reconciliation, for two reasons. They symbolize spiritual/moral traditions encouraging neighborly concern, and they frequently hold esteemed positions at the grassroots level. For example, workshops in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina empowered religious leaders to undertake reconciliatory activities.

We should end with two cautionary notes on sociopolitical reconciliation processes. Both involve power. First, one should consider the conflicting groups' power positions *vis-à-vis* each other. Inter-group reconciliation should pursue fairness, especially for less powerful groups in the conflict. Low-power groups should not be pressured to initiate reconciliatory moves, even if they may be more easily swayed to do so. Furthermore, as past atrocities are exposed to the public at large, it must be remembered that the expression of social truth may be relative to who is in power. Thus narratives about historical episodes may be articulated only from the perspective of individuals or groups in influential positions.

A second precaution considers the impact that reconciliation processes may have on victims who have already suffered much from past abuses. Peace accords should not cut out the treatment of victims' pain. Attending to the internal state of victims should be done with great care and sensitivity, to effect healing without causing more anguish. Despite the obvious benefits of reconciliation, the process of social healing may create additional burdens for the less powerful and victim groups. If these vulnerabilities are protected, then the reconciliatory process can move forward fairly and more humanely.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Shriver, Donald. 1998. *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Woodstock Theological Center. 1996. *Forgiveness in Conflict Resolution: Reality and Utility*. Washington: Georgetown University.
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