

## Historicizing the Truth *as* Forgiveness: The Politics of Unconditional Love

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In order to approach now the very concept of forgiveness,  
logic and common sense agree for once with the paradox:  
it is necessary, it seems to me, to begin from the fact that, yes, there is the unforgivable.  
Is this not, in truth, the only thing to forgive?  
The only thing that *calls* for forgiveness?  
- Derrida: *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*

This is the use of memory: For liberation  
- T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

### Conceptualizing forgiveness

This section of the paper is a clarification on the contexts which demand forgiveness and what forgiveness is likely to mean in specific situations. Whether a particular instance determines what is forgivable or if there are universal laws governing forgiveness is something that needs to be investigated. I refuse to begin with a tentative definition from the Oxford English Dictionary because that would hardly be a neutral position to take in a discussion on forgiveness. Forgiveness, given the extraordinary odds it faces in reality, rejects the possibility of a literal meaning more than any other word. What forgiveness means to the one that forgives or to the one that is forgiven cannot be impartially determined. In recognizing the profoundly personal aspect involved in the act of forgiveness one realizes the difficulties in conceptualizing forgiveness. Griswold notes in his "prologue," "What is forgiveness? A moment's reflection reveals that forgiveness is a surprisingly complex and elusive notion. It is easier to say what it is not, than what it is. Forgiveness is not simply a matter of finding a therapeutic way to "deal with" injury, pain, or anger – even though it does *somehow* involve overcoming the anger one feels in response to injury" (xiv). In attempting to describe what forgiveness is "not," we come closer to the question: what is the nature of the memory that in essence defines the unforgivable? More than a thinking or a rational being the human person is a "remembering" animal and Mahfouz in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech observes, "Man remembers what hurts more than what pleases." The question of forgiveness does not arise where remembering does not exist; therefore, the act and mode of remembering are fundamental to forgiveness. In being naturally

inclined to remember “hurt,” the human person makes the idea of memory central to any discussion on forgiveness.

To be unable to forgive the hurt or what apparently causes the injury leading to the hurt makes it difficult to ascertain what forgiveness means at a conceptual level. Griswold’s “philosophical exploration” of forgiveness is inclined more towards the personal role in forgiveness rather than a conceptual rendering of it. “One of my central themes is forgiveness understood as a moral relation between two individuals, one of whom has wronged the other, and who (at least in the ideal) are capable of communicating with each other. In this ideal context, forgiveness requires reciprocity between injurer and injured. I shall reserve the term *forgiveness* for this interpersonal moral relation” (xvi). The notion of “hurt” in relation to memory is personal where one might be involved either as victim or victimizer in acts of individual or collective violence. The notion of collective hurt is a myth and metaphor because the bearer of the memory of hurt is without exception an individual. In visualizing memory as a narrative it is possible to structure the “interpersonal moral relation” in which forgiveness could be realized. The meaning of forgiveness is intertwined with the memory of the unforgivable. Without the remembrance of “hurt” I cannot imagine the basis of what is unforgivable. In the process, memory recreates the unforgivable in multiple hues in order to give it the shape of a narrative. Memory however like meaning itself is not independent of what we perceive as truth of the matter. The memory of an event is a text that functions in an alternate space to the truth of the event. In fact what we always already have at our disposal is the memory and never an unchanging constant view of the event itself. As Haber observes, “What forgiveness means can be determined only by focusing on what people mean when they use the term” (26). What one means when one uses the term forgiveness and the framing of the memory that will serve as a context to what is unforgivable – both together will determine the finer intricacies involved in the act of forgiving.

My argument rests on the possibility of a truth that is less than absolute and more than relative and therefore qualifies to be a *sine qua non* for one to expect or demand forgiveness. The unforgivable can be conceptualized to the extent that we are willing to imagine forgiveness as a possibility to be sincerely explored. In that sense nothing is absolutely unforgivable nor is everything within the realm of the forgivable for its own sake. As Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt note in their introduction to *Memory and Political Change*:

Every act of remembrance, whether individual or collective, necessarily involves selective, partial, or otherwise biased forms of forgetting. Sometimes, a short phase of forgetting may precede the search for historical truth; other times, as in South Africa or Rwanda, this search for truth is closed after a clearly limited time span. The problem which is posed does not take the form of a clear choice for either remembering or forgetting. Instead, we are faced with concrete choices about when, how and which events of the traumatic or guilty past will eventually be recalled and faced by individuals, community and state (5).

What we call the “truth” revolves around the “sincerity of the wish to overcome inveterate hostile or mutually suspicious dispositions” (Shortt 5). The memory of historical

truth with reference to the exactness of an event if pursued as an end in itself, becomes an academic exercise with no interpretive content that respects the need to discover ways and means of arriving at a dialogue. Two things are central here: where truth is not the basis for dialogue, as in a sincere wish to confront the past in order to creatively arrive at the present where dialogue could become an everyday reality, the question of forgiveness might not be a priority. From a historical perspective, only the *truth* – wherein the victim is accorded the space of articulation – is entitled to be forgiven or likewise not to be forgiven. This applies both to interpersonal forgiveness as well as political apology. The role of the victimizer is significant to the extent that there is an acknowledgement of wrongdoing. In the absence of such an acknowledgement, forgiveness becomes a one-sided affair; however, the conceptualizing of forgiveness, which is the primary focus of this part of the essay, necessarily is about no conditions being imposed on the victimizer. The second thing is that the framework within which forgiveness is conceptualized ought to be nothing less than “unconditional love” which simply places the other person or group above oneself for no other reason except that what is unforgivable is a reality that cannot be rationally comprehended. Forgiveness has to be non-rational and emotional to the point of leaving the self both vulnerable and uncertain.

What is rational and negotiated enters the domain of qualification making it impossible for real forgiveness to occur. Without the element of non-rationality that made the unforgivable a reality in the first place, no forgiveness is possible because the latter too must embrace the non-rational in order for it to be liberated from a painful past. By using the word “non-rational,” I mean to say that no concrete, plausible reasons need to be appendaged to the transcending premise that forgiveness must be an end in itself. If forgiveness were merely to be about letting go, its immediate outcome would be practical and limited to the one who forgives. Its larger implications are however cultural and political. Forgiveness breaks the conventional barriers that legal and social institutions place on individuals. In Tolstoy’s short story “A Spark Neglected Burns the House,” the dying father insists that his son Ivan acknowledge his guilt in the making of an enmity with the neighbor, and keep the neighbor’s role in setting fire to the house a secret. “The old man closed his eyes, moved his lips as if to gather strength, and opening his eyes again, said: ‘You’ll manage. If you obey God’s will, you’ll manage!’ He paused, then smiled, and said: ‘Mind, Iván! Don’t tell who started the fire! Hide another man’s sin, and God will forgive two of yours!’ And the old man took the candle in both hands and, folding them on his breast, sighed, stretched out, and died.” Through the act of forgiveness, the sense of neighborliness is restored and no attempt is made by the aggrieved party to seek legal or any other kind of redress.

If memory is defined as the capacity to reinvent a self, injuries or a sense of being hurt whether at the personal or the collective levels, tend to make a narrative in relation to the self a little larger than life. A story comes into being through the conscious use of memory as a creative tool for the self to speak for itself. As Charlotte Linde puts it in the conclusion to her book *Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory*:

Narrative is the discourse unit that presents both what happened, that is, events in the past, and what they mean, that is, the evaluation or moral significance of these events...The answers shape how the members act; how they think they should act; how they try to predict the results of their actions; how they or others decide

whether someone is or is not really one of Us; how they use, change or contest that past in order to understand the institution as a whole as well as their place in it (221).

That memory is the basis for the construction of identity is stating the fairly obvious. What might seem strange is that outside memory it is impossible to configure the narrative of oneself as a “self”. To what extent is this memory shared by others or will be inclusive of a group will decide not just its value as narrative but also its historicity. Either way the past is worked upon, if not as if one were writing on a “blank slate,” but certainly with the intent to erase details that do not fit into one’s own sense of the past. Thus, by not allowing the narrative to relapse into an endless chain of explanations and counter explanations, Ivan in Tolstoy’s story is willing to pay the very small price that peace might demand through forgiveness. The past in a way becomes irrelevant to Ivan because it is simply not conducive to lasting peace in any sense of the term. The memory of injuries tends to freeze time in a capsule where the story is happening with the weight of the “now” on it without taking the existential condition of a flowing narrative into consideration. Memory as a cultural repository and a resource for story-telling to the first person is never the same as a narrative that fulfills the conditions that a third person insists upon as framework for the truth. Bruce M. Ross makes the observation that;

where life experiences are involved, it is quite likely that the proportion of distortion errors is much higher. The inertial logic inherent in our autobiographical narratives commonly encourages continuity, even permitting "embroidering the truth" as against discontinuous saltations and outright gaps (Ross 47).

In writing about the self, one tends to maintain the “inertial logic” in order to give the narrative a sense of continuity. The selfhood of a person is more than any one particular hurt at a point in time. The familiar tendency however is to make the one experience of hurt appear central to the narrative giving it a sense of linearity in defiance of fragmentation, which is the true character of a story that for example like the *Arabian Nights* constitutes countless other stories within a story networked within a larger frame of things. This same tendency makes the narrative appear meaningless and empty in the absence of the story of the hurt. The author of the self-based narrative needs that point in memory to pin the narrative down to reality. As Ross notes, “In the hermeneutic scheme of things the recovery of memory content is not a distinct act but a continuing indefinite process of tailoring material to narrative structures” (108).

Without dwelling on the complexities of what memory means when it enters the domain of the narrative, my argument is about situations where there is no doubt that victimization has occurred. They are political contexts where individuals or groups have abused power in a way that could only be deemed “unforgivable.” In the chapter “Racial Communism: Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge,” Eric D. Weitz writes about the unspeakable horrors that took place under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

The extent of mass killings in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge was enormous, almost unfathomable. Estimates vary widely, but most likely around 1.5 out of 8 million people died in the short, brutal reign of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979...In this extraordinary killing operation, the Khmer Rouge managed to combine

all the worst aspects of the twentieth century into one overarching system of compulsion and terror. The purifying ethos of revolution, the drive to create a homogeneous, perfect society, made the Khmer Rouge apply their proclivities with a frightening literalness (144-45).

All acts of mass violence that involve humiliation, degradation and the stripping of the other person's sense of selfhood thus reducing the person to the level of an object fall in the category of the unforgivable. The use of torture is another instance of what best illustrates the unforgivable: torture is the reality the body understands through insight and the mind recollects with horror. That's what makes the unforgivable *real* because forgiveness as "unconditional love" is liberation from a destructive reality. What makes the memory destructive is the fact that it gets reinforced over a period of time making it impossible for an analysis outside what the self is convinced to be *the* truth. The memory of what is unforgivable is a destructive force because it takes away the space of an open dialogue with oneself. In the essay "Perspective, meaning and remembering," John A. Robinson makes the following observation:

I surmise that the development of explanations over time resembles hypothesis testing. The "data" are remembrances, the "truth conditions" are explicit and implicit representations of personal and social goals and beliefs. A final account is adopted through selective testing of its elements for fit with personal need and social necessity. Acceptable explanations can change but must always satisfy personal and social criteria (Rubin 212).

Forgiveness is not just about freedom from the selective use of memory to think about past hurt, but it is also about restoring oneself as a self that is able to function without the fear of being hurt. The realization that "explanations" are about elements that "fit with personal need and social necessity" makes it imperative to also come to terms with the partiality in all attempts to reconstruct the past. While "torture" is an instance of what is unforgivable, forgiveness is liberation from the partiality with which we look at the past. The unforgivable is "meaningful" because it relies on a linear narrative that is told with a specific situation in mind; forgiveness, however, given its emotional and spiritual dimension, carries within it a sense of *meaninglessness* because it does not fit in with the logic of the situation. The reasons not to forgive are always clearer than the usually vague sense of why one must forgive owing to the dearth of explanations. The reasons for forgiveness have to be larger than what is possible to accommodate within a purely semantic framework.

### **Imagining the Unforgivable**

Where the semantic framework tends to be limited, forgiveness has to be an emotional act with no distinct meaning attached to it. Likewise, it becomes necessary to visualize what is the unforgivable. If forgiveness is personal in the sense that only victims are entitled to offer it, then it is a time-bound act specific to historically situated individuals. There would be nothing like collective forgiveness because the memory of the history of pain is a weight acquired through a process of internalization that happens over a period of time. This argument may not apply to those who are in need of forgiveness for unforgivable acts or decisions made in history; for instance, men who are in positions of authority as

leaders of nations or as generals in a war. The situation of expecting forgiveness down the generations might be intensive in cases where one group is an economic and social minority in relation to the mainstream, majoritarian social order. While emphasizing the importance of “apology” Roy L. Brooks in *Atonement and Forgiveness: A New Model for Black Reparations* observes the following:

Redressing slavery and Jim Crow should be about honor, not alms. It should be about black pride and dignity, and, last but not least, it should be about commemorating and memorializing the slaves. These heroic men, women, and children were denied freedom so that all Americans might live in the freest and most prosperous nation humankind has ever known. Simply providing slave redress without a prefatory statement of deep remorse—an act that puts slave redress in its proper historical and international context—is too inelegant a response to slavery and Jim Crow (142).

The emphasis on “honor” and not “alms” underscores the fact that minorities – in this case, black Americans – seek recognition in terms of “pride” and “dignity” because it brings out the point that they wish to be considered as social and political equals before they are economic equals. This does not alter the basic point that slavery comes under the category of the unforgivable which means that any act of forgiveness has to accept that there are victims who stand in direct opposition to victimizers.

Though we cannot know forgiveness except from the position of a victim, what we can imagine is the “unforgivable” since it is the focus of history as a narrative. Slavery and colonialism are wrongs beyond question and citizens of nations or societies whose historical opportunities to exist as equals has been denied them have every right to feel aggrieved and expect to be treated with a certain degree of pride along with economic and social compensation as a form of “atonement” so that the forgiveness is realized. This however does not answer the question of what forgiveness is all about. Forgiveness as the politics of unconditional love is anti-historical because it rejects the narrative built around the memory of pain as the basis for either the making of selfhood or an understanding of the past in relation to the present. Forgiveness is the narrative of the eternal present that the unforgivable is not despite the fact that the latter uses “present” suffering to talk about the past. In its more ideal sense, forgiveness is about *forgetting* the past rather than rewriting it as a way of exploring the emotional aspects involved in the process of hurting and healing.

One way to know the meaning of forgiveness as unconditional love is through being able to visualize the unforgivable. The historian of the crusades, Steven Runciman in the chapter on “The German Crusade” speaks of the massacre embarked upon by the religiously motivated warriors with their entry into Hungary. Runciman says, “There was fighting; several deaths occurred and a young Hungarian boy was impaled by the Crusaders” (140). The impaling of the Hungarian boy, although a detail, when compared to the massacres of the self-appointed defenders of the faith, defines what is unforgivable. Another image equally powerful and thus unforgivable is the “roasting” of the babies on spits by the crusading armies in the villages of the suburbs of Nicaea inhabited by the Christian Greeks (128). This is an attempt to imagine the unforgivable through the use of pictures; the reality however is far too gruesome for normal human comprehension in the sense that we cannot

imagine being present on the scene as objective viewers from another time-space; it can only be a narrative happening at a physical and psychological distance.

In Eisenstein's silent film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) the intensity of the massacre on the Odessa steps is recreated through a baby carriage with an infant in it rolling down the steps while the mother who is fatally shot is dying. As a filmmaker Eisenstein is trying to portray what is cruel and unforgivable about the Czarist regime. The suffering of a child, especially when it is a consequence of man-made brutality, is enough reason to doubt the sense of justice of an average human being. Because the suffering inflicted on children is unforgivable, it actually becomes a reason for us to cast doubts on the truthfulness in the presence of the supernatural in charge of human affairs. What is humanly unforgivable from the standpoint of the victims cannot be divinely pardonable from the perspective of the gods.

Thus, the unforgivable is best dramatized when we see children in the positions of victims. This is the point Ivan Karamazov makes in order to willfully deconstruct the saintly Alyosha's belief in the goodness of God or in the capacity of human nature to change for the better. He takes the examples of the sufferings of children to point out that the human person is inherently evil because he or she could commit violence against a child and violate without fear of consequences the fragile state of being that defines childhood. Ivan narrates the strange and horrifying incident of a five-year old child tortured by her parents.

They beat her, thrashed her, kicked her for no reason till her body was one bruise. Then, they went to greater refinements of cruelty...Can you understand why a little creature, who can't even understand what's done to her, should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fist in the dark and the cold, and weep her meek unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her?...Without it, I am told, man could not have existed on earth, for he could not have known good and evil. Why should he know that diabolical good and evil when it costs so much? Why, the whole world of knowledge is not worth that child's prayer to 'dear, kind God!' (265)

The extent to which the violence is unforgivable becomes the basis to doubt the existence of a benevolent or just God who rewards and punishes in equal measure. There ought to exist something more than the normal human capacity for goodness, in order for a certain kind of violence to be forgiven, because there is no logical or reasonable basis to such a forgiveness. Griswold observes that both "interpersonal forgiveness as well as political apology require that the truth be told and heard. Both are therefore committed not only to truth telling, but to the proposition that it is better to remember than to forget" (195). Where victims and victimizers are willing to go by a sense of the "truth" with the conviction that reconciliation is possible through remembering while consciously making an effort to come to terms with the past, we could imagine forgiveness as a practical possibility. But, where forgiveness becomes the burden with which the "victim" must cope, that's where we get to see the real face of forgiveness as unconditional love. It defies practicality and does not wait for the "victimizer" to make the first move. Forgiveness as love, from a "pragmatic" point of view, must be an illogical, unreasonable and "insane" (as in stretching the bounds of any definition of normalcy or sanity) enterprise for it to succeed in being forgiveness. The madness of forgiveness would itself be at war with the insanities that make

up for human cruelty in the form of pogroms and genocides. The whole point about the element of non-rationality in real forgiveness collapses because what Portia is seeking from Shylock in Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* is more than what Shylock or anyone in his place is capable of offering.

Therefore, Jew,  
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,  
That, in the course of justice, none of us  
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;  
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render  
The deeds of mercy (*The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, Scene 1).

Shylock has no human reason to forgive Antonio; therefore, the point that "in the course of justice, none of us/ Should see salvation." But, seriously speaking, Shakespeare is aware that "salvation" is hardly an argument for any formal request to real forgiveness. The mercy that Portia says "is enthroned in the hearts of kings" is about power because one cannot separate the "heart" of the king from the king who embodies the right to give or take the life of his subjects. In the normal scheme of things, no forgiveness makes sense or is possible because the reality of what is unforgivable is far too concrete to be relegated to an imaginary state haunting victims, even if one were to go by the implausible assumption that victims make great narrators but not always the best judges of their situations.

There is no scientific reason to believe that revenge is less satisfying at the personal level than forgiveness. On the contrary, the emotional satisfaction revenge provides through punishment ought to be, at least to the victim, reason enough to let go of the past or speak of it with a sense of relief. Revenge, in the popular imagination, carries a greater sense of certainty than forgiveness and so is as real as what constitutes the unforgivable. The exile, imprisonment or the deaths of the "bad" guys at the end of the story is a way of "ending" the narrative by letting go of the event. The idea that the "bad" is inevitably punished which is true of stories in almost all cultures is another way of saying that the bad should or will be punished. Tomas Böhm and Suzanne Kaplan give the example of *The Count of Monte Cristo* which, they view, as an example of

a novel about cruelty and revenge, where a mere innocent human being can turn the tables from a position of powerlessness so that those who are powerful and guilty are reduced to helplessness. Revenge becomes legitimate through our being able to identify with the protagonist and his unjust treatment. Dantès takes the meting out of punishment into his own hands in the form of acts of revenge; in other words, he equates justice with revenge. In addition, his fortune gives him unlimited means to take revenge (9).

There are multiple oppositions involved here: innocence versus guilt, powerlessness versus power, truth versus lie, justice versus injustice, good versus evil etc. The hero or the protagonist in the quest for revenge must satisfy more or less fully one set of characteristics in being innocent, placed in a situation of powerlessness that makes him or her a potential victim, truthful to him or herself, ultimately just and even good to the extent demanded by the situation. In such a situation the right to revenge is earned and rightfully belongs to the



“victim.” What gives the politics of revenge legitimacy is that it has the consent of those who matter in a majority. Revenge is institutionalized through law courts, the police, the army, bureaucracy, religious ideologies, the family and the media in a way that forgiveness is not.

Seneca, like Portia, however seems to believe that power at a higher level makes forgiveness meaningful in the eyes of the public.

One can more easily forgive ordinary people who are implacable in pursuing vengeance: they can suffer real harm; their pain comes from actual wrongs; they are furthermore afraid of being despised; and they appear weak, not clement, when they don't return the favor to people who harm them. But the person who has vengeance at his beck and call can be sure he'll be praised as gentle if he lets an opportunity for revenge go by (153).

The “revenge” that is idealized through narratives in popular culture is the tendency to seek punishment for the wrongdoer which is a feature of the common person. This argument may not work where there are institutions that make “revenge” possible through the exercise of “justice.” The popular equation of revenge with justice makes it difficult for the person on the street to make the subtle difference between emotional gratification that comes through revenge and justice that is much more than a feel good factor. As much as revenge seems to be much more “natural” and “human” in comparison to forgiveness which is exceptional and characteristic of very few individuals, the truth might be contrary to the obvious as Michael McCullough convincingly argues.

It may come as no surprise, then, that humans, many nonhuman primates, and even domestic goats experience anxiety and tension in the aftermath of interpersonal transgressions —especially in relationships with relatives and close associates. For these species, post - conflict anxiety appears to prompt individuals to reestablish positive contacts with each other as a way of moving forward with their damaged, but still valuable, relationships. The reason such mechanisms exist today is because as these species were evolving many millions of years ago, those individuals who could “forgive” their closest relationship partners did better on the evolutionary treadmill than those who couldn't forgive, and thus the capacity to get over resentments and reestablish important relationships became typical of the species. Natural selection is also how forgiveness became typical of *our species* — how it became part of human nature (14-15).

By imagining the unforgivable we are also able to imagine the forgivable. The memory of victimization makes curious demands of victims by way of response. Victims are as complex as victimizers or perhaps more so in terms of what they expect by way of reparation. They might merely want an acknowledgement of injustice done to them or punishment. It need not completely be one or the other. Theoretically speaking, unconditional love manifested through acts of forgiveness is as practical as the seeking of revenge might be either through institutional or personal efforts. The liberation from a painful memory of cruelty prevents survival from being reduced to acts of aggression and reinforces instead the creative instinct that is responsible for accomplishments in various fields of knowledge.

If survival is enhanced through the politics of forgiveness, it does not follow that people automatically give up resentful or vengeful behavior. What is “unforgivable” is about meaningless and irrational violence, and the kinds of choices that are made in the process of committing acts of aggression. Iago makes a serious point when he says, “Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus/ or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which/ our wills are gardeners” (Act 1, Scene 3). In the essay *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud does not have a complementary view of human nature, when he says, “The bit of truth behind all this.— one so eagerly denied.—is that men are not gentle, friendly creatures wishing for love, who simply defend themselves if they are attacked, but that a powerful measure of desire for aggression has to be reckoned as part of their instinctual endowment” (24). Irrespective of whether unforgivable acts are a part of our “instinctual endowment” or not, for a victim to be able to rise above feelings of animosity is to be able to transcend the role of memory in the making of the personhood of a person.

Revenge needs rational justification which is not possible with forgiveness because the demands made by the memory of what is unforgivable are far too great to be overcome through reason and argument at any given point in time. The thought of revenge may not be confined to the present because memory makes demands that are greater than one or more individual life times. In a Derridean sense, it points out to the im-possibility of forgiveness; to forgive is not merely to defer the meaning of a painful memory into an unknown future; it is also about the flux that leaves the self in a vulnerable state in the face of victimization.

### **Forgiveness and the Sacred**

If at a theoretical level, forgiveness is as close to realization as is revenge, what makes the unforgivable a memory impossible for oneself to distance from, is the suspicion that one is being unfair to oneself. The question that a victim has every right to ask of herself is why at all she should be forgiving in the first place when she might as well cling to the memory of being victimized and seek revenge either in the mind or in reality. No satisfactory answer, practical or impractical, is possible that would appropriately legitimize an act of unconditional love where one forgives with no thought of apology or reparation of any kind. In this part of my paper I wish to argue that the question of forgiveness even in a secular context – outside the context in which religion and religious people play a role in creating a framework of forgiveness within the realm of civil societies – cannot be separated from the sense of the sacred. The sacred I would define as anything outside the domain of rational explanation. The sacred has a rationale of its own and is connected to the human need to sanctify life for its own sake. Eliade rightly makes the following point:

What we find as soon as we place ourselves in the perspective of religious man of the archaic societies is that ***the world exists because it was created by the gods***, and that the existence of the world itself “means” something, “wants to say” something, that the world is neither mute nor opaque, that it is not an inert thing without purpose or significance. For religious man, the cosmos, “lives” and “speaks” (165).

The argument applies to the “desacralized” modern existence as well where the “Modern nonreligious man assumes a new existential situation; he regards himself solely as

the subject and agent of history, and he refuses all appeal to transcendence” (Eliade 203). Despite the fact that any argument in favor of “transcendence” is viewed as apolitical or ahistorical as opposed to “this-worldly” by the secularists, the “modern” person continues to look for transworldly meaning or what transcends logical explanation in more ways than one. As Eliade notes, “A purely rational man is an abstraction; he is never found in real life. Every human being is made up at once of his conscious activity and his irrational experiences” (209). To speak of the politics of forgiveness is to speak of the role of the sacred in politics. The appeal to conscience for instance is an appeal to the sense of sacred outside the parameters of human languages. The idea of conscience as a “voice” speaking to oneself about oneself in relation to the world around you is a fairly prominent one. In the same breath conscience serves as an inner ear deep in the unconscious to which the other being appeals for an acknowledgement of his or her humanity. Schinkel notes,

The voice of conscience is an element both on the level of symbolization, and on the experiential level...The symbol of the voice expresses the insistent quality of the experience of conscience. It also expresses the transcendent quality of that experience, in the sense that the voice comes from beyond oneself; there is an experienced externality (120).

Forgiveness is an appeal to the conscience: an appeal that transcends ordinary human nature or experience at its weakest or strongest. In the appeal to conscience the victims hope to touch upon possible elements of decency in human nature. Through a similar appeal to conscience, victimizers might seek to be forgiven for acts that are outside the zone of what is forgivable. The idea of humanness as one transcending how people act in day-to-day lives as human persons is strictly speaking a humanist notion, that might have had its origins in religious morality. The idea of conscience as political reality to which individuals and groups caught in situations of utter helplessness look for succor goes along with the Gandhian project of spiritualizing politics. The protest of the Gandhian kind, in all sincerity, appeals to what might be innately capable of transformation in human nature. To forgive becomes a way to resist the violence of power. The victors speak from the point of view of reason because they wish to appear logical to themselves while the vanquished at the risk of sounding melodramatic and sentimental must submit to passion and look for something greater than logic that’ll give their situation a semblance of meaningfulness. Is the appeal to the transcendent reality of conscience the sigh of the vanquished or a way of reminding power of its existential limitations? An instance from Gandhi’s autobiographical narrative *Satyagraha in South Africa* makes the point. The scene involves a mob ready to lynch Gandhi for some of his criticism of the Europeans of Natal and the treatment suffered by indentured labourers. He says:

The crowd began to abuse me and shower upon me stones and whatever else they could lay their hands on. They threw down my turban. Meanwhile a burly fellow came up to me, slapped me in the face and then kicked me. I was about to fall down unconscious when I held on to the railings of a house nearby. I took breath for a while and when the fainting was over, proceeded on my way. I had almost given up the hope of reaching home alive. But I remember well that even then my heart did not arraign my assailants (43).

In the face of the certainty of death, not to feel hatred for one's assailants is what makes forgiveness real to the point of madness. Prior to this passage is another one where his companion Mr. Laughton sensing danger in the mob ready to attack Gandhi calls a rickshaw to his aid. Gandhi says: "I had never sat in a rickshaw before, as it was thoroughly disgusting to me to sit in a vehicle pulled by human beings. But I then felt that it was my duty to use that vehicle. I have experienced five or seven times in my life that one, whom God wishes to save, cannot fall even if he will" (43). Given the possibility of being lynched by the mob, all that Gandhi could think of is being "spared the shame of a rickshaw ride" (43), which he attributes to divine intervention and not himself. An attitude such as the Gandhian one raises as many questions as it suggests plausible answers. Does not violence emerging from the memory of victimization in some form serve the goal of self-preservation in the face of enormous odds? Likewise, will not forgiveness of the unilateral kind which is a way of forgetting the past, where a group might suffer the possibility of a pogrom or genocide, defeat the goals of survival? Should victims be forgiving their assailants in the face of impending torture or death? What is the meaning of such an attitude unless combined with a sense of the sacred in the attempts to preserve "conscience" that Hamlet mockingly notes as making "cowards of us all!" The politics of conscience is not essentially about being anti-memory but rather about using memory for the purposes of awakening a certain strain in human character. For all the credit that Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi* (1982) gives the Mahatma for stopping the communal violence born out of India's partition, the historian Burton Stein in his book *A History of India* notes that "Gandhi's death did not end wide-scale communal strife; that came only with exhaustion..." (353).

There is a serious problem however with the appeal to conscience and the expectation that victims could erase the memory of the past merely because there is a transcendental dimension to forgiveness. The bitter truth on the ground is that power and conscience do not go together; power is about self-interest and self-preservation unlike conscience which is about preserving a larger moral sense sometimes at the expense of the self. I understand the role of appeal to conscience in circumstances where the odds are impossibly against you. Some appeal to conscience might be vital for the success of long-term projects of social and political liberation. Naguib Mahfouz declares that truth and justice will not only outlive the pyramids but will remain as long as humankind has a "ruminative mind and a living conscience." The appeal to conscience carries with it a sense of the sacred – a non-rational and artistically framed need to transcend the limitations posed by the social and political context.

The context though is far from simple. It is for victims of the state of Israel in Palestinian Territories to decide while their homes are bombed and while their children are dying or maimed to imagine in the dark unconscious what it is that could be forgiven about Israeli violence against the Arabs. By extension, the deadly violence of American Foreign Policy in the Third World – the inhuman economic embargoes that inflict suffering on common people making them fiercely nationalistic and forcing them to submit to unjust governments in the face of fear of occupation from the outside, the proxy wars, the weapons of oppression supplied by western governments to the ruling classes in the third world that cause pain and death to civilians and instills in them the need to resist by any means possible without respect to basic humanity, the victims of racism that keeps alive the notion of the "west" because otherwise there is no such thing as "western civilization" but

for a “good idea;” it is those victims who need to be given the historical option to decide if something like forgiveness is possible.

A more realistic perspective on the issue of forgiveness would be that a powerful enemy ought to be defeated both politically and militarily before it could possibly be “forgiven.” In his article “PLO and ANC: Painful Contrasts,” Eqbal Ahmad notes how “international solidarity” worked in favor of ANC. One is the campaign for “divestment” in South Africa; Ahmad further notes

When Citibank pulled out of South Africa, a decisive blow to apartheid had been dealt. Soon thereafter sanctions followed. The second, equally lethal blow was dealt by Cuba in a unique gesture of solidarity. In 1975, Cuba successfully intervened to prevent the victory in Angola of the South African-supported army of Jonas Savimbi. The government of Agostino Neto was saved, but the war went on. South Africa’s powerful army eventually entered the fray. In 1988, the predominantly black Cuban forces in Angola routed this dreaded army in pitched battles. The event changed the psychological environment for blacks as well as whites (79).

Ahmad adds: “I am tempted to transpose Lord Curzon’s remark on Japan’s 1905 triumph over Russia: “The reverberations of that victory spread like a thunderclap through the whispering galleries of Africa”” (79). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission under the chairmanship of Desmond Tutu arrived on the scene in 1995 with the ending of Apartheid. The agenda of the Commission had a unique motto to its credit.

The 1993 Constitution’s postscript was titled, appropriately enough, ‘National Unity and Reconciliation’, as was the act passed in 1995 to establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The Constitution’s postscript explicitly rejected retribution and called for past injustices to be addressed ‘on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation’. The central meaning of ‘reconciliation’ was an amnesty law, rather than the later formulations advanced by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC’s motto would be ‘Reconciliation Through Truth’, not, as it happens, ‘Reconciliation Through Indemnity’, which was more true to the 1993 Constitution’s postscript (Wilson 8-9).

In prioritizing “truth” over “indemnity,” the Commission might have been guilty of disservice to the victims of apartheid by denying them the possibility of coming to terms with their past through some form of punishment necessary to the ones that abused power. More importantly, the making of a nation is about individual citizens knowing what they cannot get away with as much as the understanding of what is allowed by law. Wilson makes the following point in this regard:

A moral response to atrocities should also be linked to a legal response – an obligation to pursue offenders who do not participate in amnesty procedures sanctioned by the 1994 political settlement...Therefore the moral response advanced by the TRC is a necessary but not sufficient condition of successful democratization.

Crucially, it is important that the legal and political responses to apartheid-era violations do not get lost in the religious paradigm of moral denunciation (57).

The question of forgiveness cannot be isolated from the question of who has been at the receiving end of that power. Neither truth is meaningful nor reconciliation possible where the subjugated continue to live in a state of subjugation or where the erstwhile oppressors are able to get away with a few sermons on good behavior for future purposes instead of a respectful fear of the law. Likewise for a person or group in a position of weakness to forgive a strong opponent cannot but seem to be lack of choice more than anything else. For the Iraqis to forgive the devastation inflicted upon their land and people by a powerful nation like the United States is meaningless because they are in a position of weakness and not of strength. The politics of forgiveness might demand parity between the strong and the weak. Apart from the religiously motivated ethical slant of the TRC in South Africa it is important to note that the West took an active interest in the politics of South Africa and despite the sanctions, racial violence was subtly condoned through the politics of forgiveness. We need not expect the repetition of this exercise in peace-building in either Iraq or Afghanistan where a “weaker” group must forgive the violence of those who are in positions of power. As Jill Scott says, “The common perception in the international community is that the TRC achieved its goals, but it is important to note that the Western world had a vested interest in the commission’s success. A free and peaceful South Africa provides a happy end to a horrific story of violence and oppression” (144). There is no doubt that a “bloody civil war” has been avoided in South Africa, but the western intervention would not have taken place had there been no whites involved in crimes against humanity. However, this is not to reduce the accomplishments of the TRC in South Africa. Worthington, Jr. notes that, “The TRC has attempted to give the victims of oppression the chance to tell their story...The South African TRC, despite its flaws, has been the greatest experiment in national healing yet to occur” (265).

It is impossible not to acknowledge the politics of intentions in the attempts to use forgiveness as the basis to prevent a past memory from coming in the way of future relations. The belief that the future matters and the awareness of the limits of what revenge could achieve are rooted in a sense of the sacred – or the attempt to find a meaning to human existence what is greater than many individual life times. In his efforts to use Satyagraha as a political weapon in South Africa, Gandhi says that he is willing to encounter death in the process.

To die by the hand of a brother, rather than by disease or in such other way, cannot be for me a matter for sorrow. And if even in such a case I am free from the thoughts of anger or hatred against my assailant, I know that that will redound to my eternal welfare, and even the assailant will later on realize my perfect innocence (Gandhi 104).

The unconditional love of the Gandhian kind that operates with a notion of the soul’s “eternal welfare” is as much about the “weak” using forgiveness as a “weapon” as much as it is about proving a point with respect to what is capable of transformation in human nature itself; the sacrifices such a process of forgiveness entails is something like infinite. Despite the fact that its practicality is in doubt its essential success as a means of resistance, as

Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. admirably proved, is beyond question. That is the context in which Worthington, Jr. sees real value in the reconciliation through forgiveness project of the TRC whose ultimate goal is to “heal” the wounds of the past rather than nurse them and let them fester in a destructive and self-defeating manner.

### **Narrating the Unforgivable**

In the discussion on forgiveness what becomes important is how the victims narrate what is unforgivable. Forgiveness is a complex human act and any attempt to find reasons for it that can be expressed in a clear-cut manner is bound to end in disappointment. It is easier to explain why people bear a grudge over a period of time when they are treated in an inhuman way but impossible to conclude why those same people might at some point decide to embark on forgiveness. The best of reasons are bound to seem superfluous even to the generous ear.

What are the spaces within “ordinary language” that are capable of providing “articulation” to a process as seemingly impossible as forgiveness? What is the memory that victims wish to escape from through a telling and retelling of the “unforgivable” narrative? What is it that victimizers seek to avoid through a selective tailoring of events in order not to confront their role in the making of an unforgivable memory? How is the language of forgiveness to be distinguished from the language used to narrate the unforgivable? While it is possible to theoretically assume that one has forgiven, the practical and linguistic phase of the forgiveness is a subject that needs to be investigated on its own terms. Wilson notes that in the case of the TRC of South Africa, the “victims’ testimonies were often characterized by a lack of the rigorous chronology essential to the factual/forensic model. Instead, testimonials were jumbled, elliptical. They were partial and fragmented, not magisterial. They were full of interpretation and enmeshed in lived memory” (49). Victims derive something of narrative “pleasure” in going into the details of their own pasts in order to make the point that they could survive through the ordeal – in some way as testimony to the power of the human spirit. There are stories within stories that cannot be ignored because otherwise the narrative would be incomplete and the true face of what is “unforgivable” would never be able to see the light. The role that forgiveness will play is seemingly minimal in this narrative. The fact that there is a narrative however makes it clear that it is not one of purely aesthetic value.

A narrative must by definition transcend the historical limitations within which an event occurs for the simple reason that any discussion of the past is a way of reconstructing aspects of the past from memory. The “cruelty” of what is remembered in a narrative is a way of imaginatively coming to terms with what one is capable of doing given the circumstances. The experience of guilt ideally ought to be a shared one because the binary opposition of good versus evil that dominates popular imagination is never remotely close to the experience of people as individuals that we share in the real world. The only way a narration is liberated from the obsessive constraints that the author-narrator imposes on the text is because the social and economic conditions of the reader will play a role in how the narrative is re-imagined. More importantly, the life of the text which is a phrase for the language that constitutes the imaginative rendering of events has a life of its own independent of the author’s intentions. Precisely because so much of popular culture is

oriented towards the politics of vengeance as embodiment of human and natural justice, forgiveness becomes the suppressed memory of any text. Even in the instances where a victim is convinced that revenge is a solution, he or she is bringing to light the all too real possibility of forgiveness as a fact of life.

Given the fact that human beings operate in a relative space, the distinction of what is forgivable and what is not is far from simple, especially when we tend to see that the feeling of being betrayed is for instance an emotion open to wide interpretation and almost every one of us is “guilty” of at one point or another in our lives, with or without our knowledge or consent, of being placed in the unconscionable role of the betrayer. Most of the times identifying the unforgivable in a vacuum without any mention of the role of the potential victim as accomplice to victimization can do injustice to an impartial definition of what is unforgivable. The point that equally deserves attention is the situation of victims turning victimizers as justification of past hurt. Keeping the multiple contexts in mind and Portia’s warning to Shylock that the quest for justice can be a pointless one because at some point collective guilt is a reality (as in the case of “men” as a category in relation to women in a patriarchal society), forgiveness is not only the fertile ground for the truth to emerge, but forgiveness is also *the* truth that needs to be historicized because the past studied as *the* past without reference to either liberating the present or the future is an exercise in futility. The politics of unconditional love is a way of rewriting history from being a narrative of pain and betrayal to a story that is constantly erasing dominant interpretations through re-readings that open the space for dialogue between individuals and groups.

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### **Suggested Citation**

Kona, Prakash. "Historicizing the Truth as Forgiveness: The Politics of Unconditional Love." *Trespassing Journal: an online journal of trespassing art, science, and philosophy* 3 (Winter 2014). Web. ISSN: 2147-2734

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