

Intercultural Forgiveness: The Conditions for the Possibility of Peace

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Forgiveness has been for me more a theological concept than a political one. But Sigal Ben-Porath has convinced me that there are good reasons for considering the crossover value of forgiveness in contemporary political discourse. I just have a few questions that I think need to be addressed to make this concept work in the political and educational arenas. My critique does not attempt to refute Ben-Porath's argument but rather to develop her argument further by drawing attention to issues that must be attended to if forgiveness is to be taught as a means to achieving peace in a multicultural society.

In her essay, Ben-Porath states, "Forgiveness must *presuppose* justice." In this response, I want to question the temporal or procedural relation between forgiveness, acknowledgement, and restitution in the process of peacemaking. Ben-Porath argues that "As victims, we must face the perpetrators who own their acts and acknowledge them before we can forgive them." Further on she claims, "The demand to do justice, by punishing the offender or compensating the victim, can be presented by the victim as a precondition to granting his forgiveness." But I wonder, do restitution and acknowledgment need to precede forgiveness, or is there room for negotiation between parties over the terms for guilt and restitution?

The presupposition of a particular standard of judgment for the attribution of guilt and forgiveness potentially begs the question of how to achieve mutual understanding and peace in a multicultural conflict. Ben-Porath's argument is better suited to a culturally homogeneous society in which all members agree upon a particular notion and system of justice than to a multicultural society in which the norms and values of different groups lead to disagreements over just what justice is and how it is to be achieved.

In a situation of conflict between members of two cultures, when Group One demands restitution for wrongs committed by Group Two prior to offering forgiveness, then Group One is not only demanding restitution for specific acts of wrongdoing, but is also demanding that Group Two accept Group One's system of norms for evaluating actions. There is a power and authority called upon here, not merely in the offering of forgiveness, but also in the attribution of guilt and the demand for restitution.¹

I am not arguing that forgiveness is not possible in a multicultural society, but the terms of forgiveness cannot be conditional upon the mutual acceptance of one party's system of justice and notion of what is right. It seems to me that a reciprocal engagement must occur prior to any attribution of guilt and requirement of restitution. This reciprocal engagement, or negotiation, will require both accuser and

accused to subject their codes of justice to questioning and transformation, at least regarding the case at hand.

For example, in a liberal, secular court, a representative of a minority cultural group accuses the dominant cultural group of “destroying their sacred.” Those being accused, who do not hold the same notion of the sacred nor have standards of justice that allow them to appraise the proper restitution due in such a case, cannot recognize within their courts the accusation as it is initially articulated. The liberal court translates this claim into terms recognizable in the liberal discourse. Instead of hearing the accusation of the destruction of their sacred, the liberal court hears the claim of racial discrimination. The victims’ claim is thus not articulated within their own discourse, and the accusers are forced to accept the accused’s norms and values in order to have their case heard. If peace or justice requires an initial acknowledgment by the accused of the legitimacy of the victim’s accusation, then the possibility of a peaceful resolution and forgiveness conditional upon restitution is seriously undermined by this incompatibility between the systems of justice evoked by each side.²

In the preceding case, it would seem that for forgiveness and peaceful relations to be established, the accused must first be willing to admit that their own system of norms and justice is lacking and then adapt their existing cultural order to permit the hearing of the accusation. Conversely, to achieve forgiveness, the accusers must also subject their own system of norms and justice to questioning in the process of engaging the accused negotiating a position from which each can understand the other. What is at stake, then, is not only the acceptance of guilt by one party and the receipt of proper restitution by the other, but rather the very notions of right and wrong held by the two parties. This departure from their respective legitimated discourses and the acceptance of a mediate discourse may seem to be the authorization of madness from the original positions from which the two groups initially judged the act.³ But such an engaged movement beyond one’s accepted normative order is demanded in the act of intercultural forgiveness.

In order to teach practices that will lead to intercultural forgiveness, one must teach that guilt is a condition assessed differently by different cultures and that wrongs felt by one group will not necessarily be felt as such those seen as the perpetrators. Ben-Porath identifies the history curriculum as a site where such practices of forgiveness can be taught. “Multicultural education,” she observes, “must confront the need to create a shared history from the narratives of various groups.” The creation of a shared history out of two or more separate histories seems to support a process of mutual transformation of existing positions. But she then goes on to state, “Peace education requires less than that — it requires recognition of the other’s perspective of history but allows former adversaries to hold on to their separate versions of the conflict.” I disagree that an education with intercultural peace as its goal can teach an engagement across difference that allows the narratives to remain separate and unaltered. An education in peace through forgiveness will require more than simply providing both sides with historical accounts from the

perspective of the other. It will also need to give members of all groups the skills necessary to *reciprocally* transfigure their respective narratives.

If the concerns that I have raised are legitimate, then the goal of a multicultural education for peace would include giving citizens the skills to create temporary intercultural or mediate discourses appropriate for hearing the claims of both sides and forging an agreement on the conditions of forgiveness. A multicultural education that teaches forgiveness would need to teach how to create not only common historical narratives but also shareable notions of justice.

As I stated at the outset, my aim is not to refute Ben-Porath's argument, but rather to further flesh out of what it would mean to teach peace and forgiveness as part of a multicultural education. The main issue I have raised is the problem of difference between participants' notions of justice. I suggest that this difference should be negotiated between the parties prior to forgiveness, as a crucial factor in making forgiveness possible. Identifying the type of pedagogy sufficient for preparing citizens of a multicultural society for such negotiations remains a difficulty central to our continuing efforts to develop a multicultural education.

1. This issue of the problem of authority in the act of prescription is discussed in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), chap. 6, sect. 195, 196, 209.

2. Such instances are central to James Tully's argument in *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For a critique of deliberative justice, see Iris Marion Young, "Challenges to Deliberative Democracy," *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 41–55.

3. See Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness," in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2001). This essay, also cited by Ben-Porath, addresses in detail this issue of the madness inherent in the act of forgiveness, as a necessary stepping outside of and beyond one's familiar ethical, moral, and normative orders.