

**FORGIVENESS AS AN ELEMENT OF CONFLICT
RESOLUTION IN RELIGIOUS CULTURES:
WALKING THE TIGHTROPE OF RECONCILIATION
AND JUSTICE**

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INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness as a way of healing human relationships and solving human conflicts is an age-old practice that appears in numerous religious traditions across the globe. There are a number of problems, however, with defining what exactly this activity is or has been in these traditions, what its significance is within these meaning systems, and, finally, what usefulness, if any, do these traditions play in contemporary analysis of conflict and peacemaking. In particular, forgiveness as a means of peacemaking, depending on how it is realized, brings into sharp relief the perennial challenge of balancing peace and justice in the pursuit of conflict resolution. Often, at least on the surface, it appears that forgiveness is at odds with the demands of justice, at least as justice is perceived by either side of a conflict.

One would imagine that the first task of this exploration is to attempt definitions of the term ‘forgiveness’ in a representative sampling of religious cultures.

But this is no easy task. The definition seems to change with the religious agent. For example, I have observed and been a participant in numerous gatherings associated with Moral Re-Armament. This is a mostly Christian group whose founder was deeply influenced by evangelical styles of Christian religiosity. MRA in particular has utilized forgiveness as a major tool of international peacemaking. [\[1\]](#) For now, let me just point out that forgiveness has a very dramatic, public confessional character in MRA circles, especially at its unofficial center in Caux, Switzerland. There is much more to MRA's method's of peacebuilding and relationship building, even at the Caux center, but space does not permit an examination here of their methods. But the public confessional moments between enemies have been particularly fascinating.

I have expressed discomfort at various junctures as to what I perceived to be the limited nature of this kind of forgiveness, in its unilateral, highly public character, with confession of wrong and apology, or conversely, unilateral gestures of forgiveness. So, when I would witness dramatic, unilateral confessions of forgiveness, I would occasionally ask Christian friends skeptically, "What about justice and repentance, what about detailed admissions of what was done, and what about the commitment to the future? How will there be a practical change in the life of the thousands or millions of victims? What about the needs of justice? Often, the answer would be, 'All of that is included in forgiveness'.

This was not a whitewash or some apologetic gesture. It simply means that forgiveness was a faith category for them that must always be included in peacemaking, even if its definition and parameters evolve. It is like hearing an ultra-Orthodox Jew claim, in the spirit of the Talmudic rabbis, that the Torah has all the answers to human problems, and that the Torah creates peace. Now outsiders, confronted with evidence of some decidedly conflict generating statements or laws of

Judaism, might find such language hard to swallow, or this language may smack of a whitewash. But, in fact, the person involved may simply mean that he will be working with Torah principles to arrive at precisely the same place that you hope to arrive in terms of peacemaking. But he will do this through the hermeneutics, or the “wisdom”, of Torah, with “Torah” meant as a dynamic phenomenon that, as the font of all truth, must be able to respond to the conflict in a peaceful way.

It started to occur to me in Caux, among my MRA friends, that in the lived religion of many--certainly not all—Christians, the reality of forgiveness is so important a faith principle, that its exact moral parameters and interpersonal characteristics can change, as long as the living reality of forgiveness is acknowledged. They may agree with me upon reflection or meditation, and argue that a true presence of forgiveness may ultimately have to result in much more just social arrangements. But, in any case, believing in forgiveness is a *sine qua non* of believing in the living reality of God. Thus it takes on an entirely different meaning than for those people--religious or otherwise--who see forgiveness as a stage in a human relationship that probably involves many other stages and moral requirements. This clearly seems to have much to do with the metaphysical meaning of forgiveness, that is, its centrality to the life, death and message of Jesus. This makes its role as a conflict resolution device hard to distinguish from its role as a dogma or means of teaching or spreading the faith. For some Christians, analyzing or breaking down forgiveness into its constituent parts, or, put another way, separating out forgiveness as a moral means of reconciliation from its role in the affirmation of the work of the Holy Spirit, may be unnecessary, and even jarring. But for those Christians, and many other non-Christians, for whom forgiveness--while certainly a central element of faith in God’s character--is also an independent moral act that must be seen in balance with

many other moral acts when it comes to conflict resolution, the analysis must be pursued.

It becomes vital, therefore, in evaluating the benefits of forgiveness to conflict resolution, to carefully study the highly varied cultural uses of the concept in the conflict situation. This is not to suggest any criticism of the use of forgiveness in one particular cultural way. It simply requires that we put all of these different styles of forgiveness into their proper context. It may be that if we do this carefully and respectfully we arrive at different definitions of forgiveness, especially theologically, but with similar or even identical conflict resolution processes that include the many ways in which “forgiveness” is perceived intellectually or experienced emotionally.

II THE LIVED CHARACTERIZATIONS OF FORGIVENESS

There are many contradictory characterizations of ‘forgiveness’ that include, for various people: verbal acts and formal gestures, confession, apology, repentance, and acknowledgment of the past; a willingness to suffer punishment as part of forgiveness; ritualized bilateral exchanges that give efficacy to forgiveness only in a prescribed set of interactions; unilateral expressions; bilateral expressions of the gesture, forgiveness that is offered and received that cancels all other obligations, colloquially ‘forgiving and forgetting’, as Hun Sen, himself a mid-level Khmer Rouge operative during the war, recently suggested Cambodians do vis à vis the Khmer Rouge leaders of the Cambodian genocide who were welcomed back by the government; forgiveness only in the context of legal compensation, justice, restoration, or the righting of past wrongs; finally, interpersonal versus collective executions of remorse, apology, and forgiveness.

This latter practice raises the highly problematic issue of collective responsibility and the dangers of forgiveness playing into one of the most conflict generating human tendencies, namely, the tendency to hold whole groups or even one individual responsible for the actions of large groups. Often in public gatherings involving forgiveness in Christian cultures, there is a tendency for people to take on themselves the sins of their own group, whether or not they personally committed those sins. This is the precise foundation of the first stages of most ethnic violence, where victims are guilty because of their ethnicity and are held responsible as if they have committed all the offenses of a group. Indeed, there can be no mob psychology without this cognitive and emotive construct of the world. But being responsible for an entire group is a foundational religious notion. This is in essence the Christian notion of Jesus taking on the sins of the world, suffering for it, and providing forgiveness for those who believe in him by dying for their sins.^[2] Thus, we must at least raise the question of the wisdom of collective patterns of apology and forgiveness, when they have a tendency to hold responsible the innocent, or at least the less guilty, for the high crimes of others. It also has a tendency for members of victim groups to offer forgiveness in the name of those who have not consented to such a process, and who demand a closer attention to justice, restitution and even large-scale punishment. Thus it may satisfy the emotional and spiritual needs of those present, but only enrage those who are not present.

Finally, there are understandings of ‘forgiveness’ that seem to include restitution, punishment, justice, and others that seem to suggest unilateral absolution. No one seemed to suggest that Pope John Paul’s forgiveness of his would-be assassin should or would lead to his leaving jail. In these Christian contexts, one must be careful to distinguish this-worldly absolution and other-worldly absolution, as one evaluates the intended character of the gesture.

Let us now list, for purposes of clarity, the different styles of forgiveness that can be observed in the lived human experience:

1. Unilateral forgiveness—internal
2. Forgiveness with forgetting
3. Unilateral forgiveness—external, by words or by deeds:
 - A. Toward individuals who have injured you personally
 - B. Toward groups who have injured you personally
 - C. Toward groups or individuals who have injured people you love or your group but not you
4. Delimitation of guilt to only those who have actually perpetrated crimes, no group responsibility, or, alternatively, group forgiveness with individual exceptions.
5. Forgiveness for some crimes but not others
6. Bilateral forgiveness—internal, or external and formal
7. Unilateral apology, which may include contrition, acknowledgement of guilt, detailed confession of crimes
8. Bilateral apology leading to mutual forgiveness
9. Forgiveness only in the context of restoration of what was lost if possible, that is, payment for sins

10. Forgiveness only after a series of symbolic, ritual acts that express or reify #'s 6, and 7.

11. Forgiveness but no forgetting

12. Forgiveness with repentance that includes formal moral acts, moral changes in behavior as evidence of profound human transformation, as if a new person were born, especially when the person or group is confronted by the same potential for crime again but now resists or reacts in an opposite fashion

13. Forgiveness as birth of a new person, either victim, perpetrator or both.

14. Acts of embrace of the other in response to apology, though not specifically using the language of forgiveness

15. Unilateral symbolic acts that never acknowledge forgiveness, but symbolically signal a return to the previous relationship, or a new and better relationship

16. Forgiveness as a part of "reconciliation" and "restoration" of relationship (in the Mennonite sense of these terms)

III. THE USES OF FORGIVENESS

I would like to investigate briefly the uses of forgiveness in religious contexts, but briefly critique its uses in the realm of psychological health. It should be stated that there have been arguments recently, which I argue stem from a Christian cultural context, that forgiveness is good for your mental and physical health, and that this is,

therefore, a good reason in and of itself to engage in this activity. [3] The definition of forgiveness used by some of these researchers includes the following:

Genuine forgiveness is *voluntary* (my italics throughout) and *unconditional*. Thus it is not motivated by pressure from a third party, nor is it dependent on the apology or recognition of wrongdoing on the part of the offender. Genuine forgiveness constitutes an *internal* process that transforms the forgiver and also may transform the one forgiven, if he or she is able to receive the *gift* of forgiveness. [4]

This would eliminate most of the models of forgiveness, described below, that I have seen in Judaism Islam, in addition to what I suspect would be the result of researching Catholic, Buddhist and indigenous peoples' styles of reconciliation or resolution of conflict. It does, however, fit nicely a certain version of the Protestant ethos. In fact, in one of the studies cited on religious uses of forgiveness, people were divided into "extrinsics" versus "intrinsic", the latter described as having "...religiousness that is motivated by the conviction that one's religious *faith* (my italics) is the "master motive" for one's life." [5] Needless to say, the study concludes that the "intrinsic" demonstrate a deeper level of both guilt and forgiveness and are therefore more successful at this enterprise. In fact, the study even resorted to using "grace" and "no-grace" as a means of categorizing the recipients of the forgiveness. The emphasis on interior faith and grace, and the lesser emphasis on external symbols and rituals, are classic markers of Protestant culture.

The prevailing American context involves a religious cultural orientation that values internal faith and internal processes rather than external, formal transformations. It assumes that the latter is more mechanical and less authentic. Now it may be the case for many human beings globally that "extrinsic" religion can become less authentic in terms of human transformation, and that internal processes of

change are ultimately critical in truly changing the dynamics of conflict. But many other people from every culture that I have studied, including Christian culture, find that, on the contrary, the extrinsic, formalistic, symbolic moments of bilateral reconciliation, or apology, or repentance, are the *only* way to transform a relationship with an estranged other, especially when that estrangement is decades or centuries old. It is as if the encrustation of violent history can only be broken by symbol and action, not pious words, or claims of internal transformation.

The problem with the conclusions of the above studies is not that they are invalid by definition, but that they have not been subject to cross-cultural examination, especially non-American cross-cultural transformation. When applied to humanity they have the air of cultural/religious imperialism about them, even when this may not have been intended. We are just at the beginning of understanding the full range of humanity's processes of interpersonal and inter-group transformation. We must be aware of the cultural constructs of what we recommend for peacemaking if we do not want to do even more damage as intervenors in violent or deeply conflictual situations.

This critique of American psychological approaches to forgiveness should be distinguished from the work of Volkan, Montville, and others, that should be properly referred to as psychodynamic approaches to reconciliation. [\[6\]](#) This research, and the projects that have emerged from it, while still needing cross-cultural scrutiny, has taken on a much more subtle approach to the subject of human patterns--internal and external, formal and informal, symbolic and verbal--of injury, rage, mourning, and reconciliation, that allows for a very wide degree of cultural diversity and cultural latitude. This approach also needs cross-cultural scrutiny, as all global investigations do, but so far the evidence is that when one does not begin with predetermined

definitions of what is transformative in human relationships, and one listens and is guided by indigenous orientations, it is possible to evoke transformations of human relationships in many cultures. But this must be investigated further in a separate study.

Now let us turn to the world of religion. My discussion in this essay, for reasons of space only, needs to be limited to the Abrahamic faiths, and cultures deeply affected by them. Much more needs to be investigated in other religions of the world.

In order to understand the use of forgiveness in explicitly religious conflict resolution, it is necessary to see it embedded in its other theological uses, specifically in terms of the God-human, and the God-community relationship. Furthermore, in its pristine religious form, we need to divide it into the uses of receiving versus offering forgiveness. Receiving forgiveness from God is a key to being in the good graces of God, to avoiding punishment, receiving rewards, in addition to the inherent reward of restoring a close relationship to God. The forgiveness may be necessary for specific sins committed, or, in the case of Christianity, it may be because the human being by nature, due to original sin, requires forgiveness from God, that can then lead to a rebirth in grace without the burden of Original Sin. The latter is only accomplished through acceptance of God's only begotten Son, Jesus. Thus, forgiveness is a key to the restoration of relationship to God, and, in the conservative Christian case, it is the key to becoming legitimate as a Christian and as a human being. Furthermore, that legitimacy is wrapped around an exclusive character to forgiveness, namely, that it can only be accomplished through faith in Jesus, not just God. Needless to say, many more liberal Christians today may dispute this exclusivity, though not necessarily the central myth of the sinful human being in need of a forgiving God.

Offering forgiveness, in the Christian case, is also an opportunity to be close to God, in that one emulates this central Divine characteristic. It should be noted that this has old Jewish Biblical roots, in terms of a God who, according to the myths, repeatedly forgave, first humanity, and then the Jewish people for their various trespasses until God could no longer avoid punishment. But patience with human failing, infinite compassion and forgiveness is seen as a basic characteristic of God in the Jewish Bible, the New Testament and the Qur'an. God is not seen as exclusively forgiving, and He is even seen to punish for several generations, as mentioned earlier. However, the forgiveness element of the Divine character lasts infinitely, or in Biblical terms, for a thousand generations. [\[7\]](#)

In the Jewish and Islamic case, God is presented as infinitely compassionate, as well as forgiving. [\[8\]](#) Needless to say, Divine wrath and punishment is also liberally expressed in both the Bible and the Qur'an. To what degree God's compassion or forgiveness requires human emulation of God is an interesting question. Let us first address this issue in Judaism.

There is no question that *imitatio dei* is critical in Judaism. Emulation in terms of compassion has clear sources [\[9\]](#), but emulation specifically in terms of forgiveness is not as universally known. The standard emphasis of rabbinic Judaism rests squarely on forgiveness as embedded in a process of change that is initiated by the person who did something wrong. In this sense, crime, change, and forgiveness are embedded in the much larger practice and metaphysical reality of *teshuva*, repentance. *Teshuva*, the capacity to transform oneself or a community, is considered to be one of the most sublime elements of faith in a good, forgiving God. The fact that repentance can change a guilty verdict is a great blessing. Resh Lakish exclaimed, "Great is repentance, for it transforms intentional sins (*zedonot*) into sins of

negligence or forgetting (*shegagot*).” And in another version, “Great is repentance for it turns intentional crimes into testimonies for a person’s goodness.” [\[10\]](#) The last quote presumably means that the degree of evil in the crime is now matched by the heroic effort it took on the part of the sinner to change what he was like, which turns the previous crime into a testimony for the person’s present goodness. The discrepancy between the two versions of Resh Lakish’s aphorism is solved Talmudically by suggesting that the latter refers to someone who repents out of love, while the former is someone who repents out of fear. [\[11\]](#)

There is also an important rabbinic idea, that is critical for Jewish consciousness, that true repentance comes when the person stands again in the same place, with the same opportunity to do the crime, and then resists it. [\[12\]](#) This will be important later, in terms of strategies of building trust between enemies, but for now it suggests some concern with whether processes of repentance, confessions of wrongdoing, are really authentic unless they have some external reality. In fact, the rabbis suggest limits to the legitimacy of repentance, such as if someone sins and repents three times, the fourth is not believed and he is not forgiven. But this last conclusion may reflect the legal/spiritual court system of the rabbis and how to handle repeat offenders. On a God-human plane, there are numerous sources, both Biblical and rabbinic, that suggest that the patience of God, and the willingness to accept repenters, is infinite, an eternal feature of the world. [\[13\]](#)

There are several interacting themes of forgiveness. There is, as stated, the idea of *teshuva*, repentance. There is *mehila*, which is the standard word for forgiveness, but there is also *seliha*, which is sometimes translated as pardon and sometimes as forgiveness. *Seliha* is translated in Psalms 130:4 as “the power to forgive”. [\[14\]](#) There is also the metaphor of wiping away or blotting out sin. [\[15\]](#) There is, of course, the

concept of atonement, *kapparah*, but it is the wiping away, the pardoning and forgiving that is stressed in many prayers, both Biblical and rabbinic, and often accompanied by the hope that this process is not accompanied by suffering. Suffering is considered an atonement for sin, but the praying person stresses those paths of forgiveness that do not involve punishment. Finally, it should be emphasized that the prayers, both daily and for special occasions, stressed that Divine forgiveness is a perpetual activity, and that this is an ongoing process between God and human being that literally requires permanent patience. [16] Another crucial phrase is *over al pasha*, literally passing over or overlooking sin, and *noseh avon*, literally carrying the burden of the sin. [17] All of these Divine qualities entail forgiveness, forbearance, patience, a resistance to anger, in addition to the obvious quality of mercy in overlooking someone's guilt. God, in these traditions, is the ultimate knower of sin. He knows just how guilty everyone is, in a way that is far more expansive than the sins that the public occasionally witnesses. Thus God's continuing to sustain human beings, to nurture their bodies from moment to moment, knowing full well the extent of their failings, is seen as a perpetual commitment to mercy, forgiveness and patience.

This theological foundation is critical to understanding what is hoped for in the personality of the human being who is called upon to forgive those who have hurt her. The rabbis characterize forgiveness as something that should come immediately if it is clear that someone is embarrassed by what they have done or if they feel guilty about it. [18] In fact, there is a notion of a person having a right to forgiveness when they have clearly repented and are now living a decent life. They may even insist upon it. [19] The right to forgiveness is an interesting concept that should be explored further.

In all of the above cases forgiveness is seen as a kind of *quid pro quo* for the moral transformation of the person. In interpersonal terms, it involves a bilateral, formal process that also has internal elements. But it seems that the rabbis saw something in forgiveness that goes beyond a bilateral process. They stated, for example, that anyone who cries at the death of a good person is forgiven for all her sins [20], that if someone is a good, kind man but he buries a child, then all his sins are forgiven, [21] that if even one person does authentic *teshuva*, repentance, it is enough to forgive the entire world (!). [22] This last point is particularly astonishing, and it suggests that there is an independent power to forgiveness that extends well beyond a simple tit for tat of one sin, one repentance and one forgiveness for that sin. But it is also clear that much of the emphasis of this literature is the power and responsibility of individuals who have hurt someone else, or sinned against God, to initiate the process of change, and only then receive a response from the injured other.

There is, however, an accompanying body of literature that suggests a unilateral process whereby the pious individual who forbears the hurts of others, who is patient with them, and who surrenders his own principles, or at least overlooks his indignation and sense of right and wrong, is acting in a patient fashion, as God does. This is seen as classic *imitatio dei*. Patience seems to be the key idea here. Vengeance, even if it is justified, is seen as the opposite of this divine quality. This is where the ideas of *over al pasha* and *noseh avon* come into play. [23]

There is an important interplay of several related concepts here. Arrogance or “hardness of the face” (*azut panim*), which is considered the opposite of humility, characterizes someone who never surrenders or wipes away his own principles. He always stands in a hard way before people. He is vengeful. The vengeful person never forgives his friends who have injured him. This, in turn, causes conflict and hatred.

The person who is perpetually angry is also the one who cannot surrender his own positions, and this too leads to revenge.

The formula for forgiveness and its role in conflict resolution is that this gesture must be preceded by the cultivation of the kind of person who has humility, who avoids a “hard face” in his presentation of self to others, who learns to control his anger, and who is willing to surrender his positions sometimes, even if he is in the right. [\[24\]](#)

Jewish mystical tradition suggests an even deeper process of reconciliation involving forgiveness. A person should emulate God as one who wipes away sin. A person should take it upon himself to wipe away the sin of his fellow human being, and by virtue of this personal involvement in improving the life of the other, helping him with his failings, the offender becomes too ashamed to then revert to his old behaviors in front of the one who has generously helped him, helping even to the point of absorbing insults. Similarly, a human being, like God, should forbear the sin of his fellow. With an enormous investment of patience, he should actually nurture the other, as God does, even as the other fails, suffering through this with him. In so doing, he stays with the other person until the person is “repaired” and the sin is wiped out. [\[25\]](#)

These sources also reveal, however, one of the fundamental weaknesses of religious traditions. The very same sources suggest that when it comes to dealing with those who are “wicked”, who are against the Torah, it is permissible to be arrogant with them and to display all the negative qualities just mentioned, in order to “fight them” and their influence successfully. [\[26\]](#) Thus, we have two dilemmas with this and many other sources: A. Who decides when the pro-social side of these texts are operationalized, and when the anti-social side is operationalized? Who decides who is

wicked? B. In the contemporary pluralistic age, most people could be classified as “wicked” or “against God”, and, thus, does this not neutralize these sources as building blocks of forgiveness and conflict resolution?

This is at the crux of the problem of the hermeneutic variability of historical religions, the fundamental ambivalence that we sense in approaching them as resources for conflict resolution. Generally speaking, it has been religious authorities, often connected with reigning structures of economic and police power, who decide who is wicked and who is righteous, to whom pro-social values must be directed, and to whom they must not. And this marriage of religious authority, embedded in larger power structures, as well as the selective application of religious values, has generally been a prescription for disaster in human history. This is not only due to the removal of large groups of people from the purview of ethical responsibility, but also due to the selective application of the ethics of submission, passivity, and humility as a tool to pacify the faithful. Thus forgiveness can potentially be selectively withdrawn from the groups who one needs most to engage, while forgiveness can also be applied more narrowly to keep religious groups from expressing anger at unjust situations.

This is a problem that must be confronted, and it lies at the heart of whether forgiveness will become an authentic, carefully crafted component of a mature system of conflict resolution that honestly confronts injustice and issue of the distribution of power, or whether it becomes a pious tool of pacification, selectively applied by authorities or public opinion to conflicts that disturb the harmony of the acceptable order of religious society. For example, it might be applied, as I have witnessed this, to fellow Christians, all involved in furthering the mission of the Christian faithful, but not to, say, communists, who are the “sworn enemies of the Church”. The examples proliferate. Forgiveness may be encouraged and insisted on for a wife when

it comes to an unfaithful husband, but not even considered when it comes to a distant “infidel” who one may be slaughtering with perfectly righteous indignation. Thus, forgiveness in this context, from the perspective of today’s concepts of conflict resolution, might be considered an unfortunate adjunct to barbarism.

Furthermore, it should be noted that religious patterns of forgiveness are only as good as the moral system that they serve. For example, if a religious system condones slavery or the death penalty for adultery, as all the Biblical religions did at one time or another, would the issue of apology, confession of guilt, and forgiveness even arise? Did it historically when religious traditions embraced slavery? Was it possible, in a society and a religion that accepted slavery, to strongly encourage a master to apologize for his act of slavery in a moral structure that did not condone it to begin with? Conversely, if a man was caught not standing before his elders would it not be certain that contrition and apology would be the first order of business, even as everyone involved is on a battlefield fighting some religious enemy? Is this an impossible scenario? Not in my experience. In other words, religious forgiveness, in terms of conflict resolution and justice, is only as helpful as the moral system that it accompanies and buttresses.

Let us turn our attention now to Islam, with a focus on texts of forgiveness and compassion as they may relate to peacemaking. Here we find some remarkably similar hermeneutic dynamics. Forgiveness is mentioned a number of times in the Qur’an. As in Judaism, much of its usage refers to God’s kindness. God is referred to as “oft-Forgiving”. In this sense, it is parallel to Divine mercy (Surah 39:53). One commentator suggests that there are three usages in the Qur’an: 1. Forgiveness as forgetting, 2. Forgiveness as ignoring or turning away from, as a defensive maneuver if someone insults you, and 3. Divine forgiveness (*ghafara*) which refers to a covering

up of sins that Allah does. [27] Allah's forgiveness extends especially to minor sins that should not be dwelled upon (53:32), but does not forgive for joining other gods to Allah (4:48), the primary betrayal of Allah. Furthermore, repentance after a life of sin only when facing death is considered inauthentic, and forgiveness is not offered (4:17-18). Throughout, both implicitly and explicitly, it seems clear that Divine forgiveness is contingent on human repentance. As in Judaism, it is a bilateral process, and forgiveness is inextricable from that bilateral relationship.

There is evidence of forgiveness even for idol worship, presumably with the requisite human repentance. Allah is seen as forgiving the "Jews" for the Golden Calf episode (4:153), and at least being patient with Abraham's slow search for God that involves initial belief in other deities (4:76-78). Furthermore, the general character of God is portrayed as forgiving. In fact, the angels are seen as praying for the forgiveness of all beings on earth (42:5), and this text, at least, presents this, apparently knowing full well that a large portion of humanity does not only commit sins, but also engages in the sin of joining other gods to Allah.

Needless to say, all of this language of forgiveness comes in the context of a literature that very explicitly approves and ordains this-worldly, violent encounters with nonbelievers, when this is legitimate and appropriate, according to Islamic law, just as we see in the historical sources of Judaism and Christianity. We will not go into here the justifications of *jihad* in Islam. It is certainly the case that there are extensive limits to the brutality of *jihad*, and that there is no compulsion allowed in terms of conversion. But suffice it to say that every collection of *hadith*, reports on the Prophet, has a special section dedicated to *jihad*, which recounts the exploits against "heathens", those who would not become Muslim, who would not accept Allah. Thus, as in Judaism, which has an extensive and subtle moral interpersonal system that

exists side by side with legitimated violence that is quite terrible in nature, especially against idolaters, here too, this literature must be seen in context.

For those trying to build an Islamic philosophy of peacemaking, clearly there is a hermeneutic tension that they see and perceive as believers. [\[28\]](#) They often solve this tension by reading and re-reading their tradition in ways that non-believers, as well as Muslims who have a greater embrace of violence in Islam, would find apologetic. We will come back to this later. But for now, it is important to note that my aim is not to present a one-dimensional picture of a complex religion. My aim is to present the hermeneutic possibilities of a tradition in relation to forgiveness, peacemaking and critically evaluate its possibilities.

Rabia Harris' read of Islam, for example, is one of the more sophisticated and honest arguments that I have seen for nonviolence in Islam. Of course, she bases her nonviolence on models from Islamic life, such as her reading of the life of al-Husayn ibn 'Ali, revered by Shi'ites, al-Hallaj, and the more recent leader of the Pathans, Badshah Khan. There are also Sufi masters, such as Bawa Muhaiyadeen, who has stated,

It is compassion that conquers. It is unity that conquers. It is Allah's good qualities, behavior, and actions that conquer others. It this state that is called Islam. The sword doesn't conquer; love is sharper than the sword. Love is an exalted, gentle sword. [\[29\]](#)

Notice the hermeneutic of religious categories of Islam that, in the hands of others, is a tool of violence: "Conquest", "unity", "the sword", even "the state". All are reinterpreted in terms of what the nonviolent believer sees as the essence of the Divine truth, namely, compassion, love, and human transformation.

Nevertheless these words are from a believer, and a believer, by definition, has to argue that the texts and traditions which she or he believes truly reflect Divine truth, have to be taken literally, while the texts or traditions that support violence must be explained, placed in context, delimited, but not extended ubiquitously or be allowed to impose themselves on the deeper Divine essence of the tradition. This appears to others as apologetics. But, on a certain level, it is not. It is rather the essential act of faith, a worldview that must be seen as primal, the ultimate religious gesture.

The question of whether peaceful interpretations of a historical religion that has justified or utilized violence in the past, are authentic or inauthentic, is the essential question of religious peacebuilding. It places in sharp relief the difference between those who are willing to dissect, in a modern historicist fashion, their historical religion, extract the peaceful and eliminate the rest, and others--the majority I believe--who find it difficult to believe in the results of such an exercise. The latter group seem to need a deeply religious hermeneutic—apologetics to others, scandalous re-reading to historians—that justifies their religion in a deep way, even as they move the religion interpretively towards peace. We will address the dilemma for the conflict resolver in responding to or using this, in our conclusions.

It also relates to the problem of the relative ignorance that the vast majority of believers across the world have of the texts of their own tradition. It is in the nature of lived religion, and perhaps always has been, that the vast majority of people, even those who are quite knowledgeable, live within the horizon of a relatively few chosen texts, laws, symbols, rituals or dogmas that occupy their inner life. And it remains a perpetual dilemma of conflict resolution with religious people as to how to confront this phenomenon in terms of training and intervention. Does one, put simply, “blow

the bubble” of religious peacemakers who do not know or refuse to acknowledge violent sources in their tradition, in order for them to be able to confront their society in a more effective way? Or, alternatively, does one simply help religious peacemakers to build the best synthesis of conflict resolution measures and their religious traditions, without challenging their knowledge of their tradition? I have struggled with this many times in my trainings, and have come to the conclusion that it depends on the student, his or her capacities, and how subtle their faith may be. Ideally, the best results come from those who know well the arguments for violence, understand and acknowledge past wrongs of their religious community and traditions, and try to move forward. But this ideal type could not be fundamentalist in the general meaning of the term. But this would eliminate all fundamentalists from being peacemakers, and this flies in the face of the evidence to the contrary, and consigns the most vulnerable segment of the religious population to those who would only interpret the tradition violently. Training and conflict resolution must, in one form or another, be able to address all people in a conflict. Otherwise it surrenders the right to the name conflict resolution. This so far is my thinking and experience in terms of training.

I want to continue with a study of Islam, and turn now from forgiveness and Allah, to human models of forgiveness. The Qur’an records that one of the instructions to Muhammad is “Hold to forgiveness...” even as he resists evil (7:199). It is expected that people have the right to repay evil for evil. However, it is also stated that those have the highest reward who, even when they are justifiably angry, can forgive (42:37). Ideally, the Qur’an suggests that people deal with their differences by a process of “Consultation”, which is not specified in the Qur’an at least, but no doubt has been developed over the centuries. This consultation reference could and should become the basis for religiously sanctioned processes of conflict

management. There is no blame for those who cannot forgive, however forgiveness combined with reconciliation yields a reward from Allah (42:40). Forgiveness combined with compensation for injury appears to be a preferable path to retaliation even if retaliation is permitted. (*Hadith Sahih Bukhari* 3.49.866). This is an interesting position, in that it recognizes that the recompense of injury is injury, following along the lines of Exodus 21:24, the *lex talionis*, eye for an eye, legal principle. Judaism never accepted the literal reading of this Middle Eastern principle. Islam too sees forgiveness as the preferable act. Most importantly, forgiveness is seen as the act of a “courageous will” (42:43). “A strong person is not the person who throws his adversaries to the ground. A strong person is one who contains himself when he is angry (Malik’s Muwatta 47.3.12).”

This has important implications for allowing the forgiving man to think of what he does as not cowardly but an act that confirms his strength as a person. This is important in response to some troubling questions that a conflict resolver would have with forgiveness in conflict resolution, namely, what it accomplishes and does not accomplish in terms of the empowerment of both sides. [\[30\]](#) In addition to the need for justice to be achieved in authentic conflict resolution, there also needs to be a resolution of the sense of powerlessness felt often by victims of violence. If forgiveness is merely a religious requirement, but is not seen or felt as some form of empowerment, then its effectiveness in truly resolving and transforming the conflict may be limited. The religious act may repress hidden anger, and turn into a formalistic act that does not address the person’s deeper needs. It is vital that forgiveness, if it is to be done, is seen and felt as an empowering act. This text would affirm this inner process, as does the rabbinic dictum, “Who is the greatest hero among the heroes? He who turns an enemy into a friend.” [\[31\]](#) Once again, classical Judaism and Islam share a strategy of how particularly to get the male to become a peacemaker. This is

particularly vital in terms of both traditions, the Biblical and the Qur'anic, having religious prophets and heroes who were warriors, such as Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, and Muhammad.

There is also some evidence for the willingness to forgive unbelievers. "Tell those who believe to forgive those who do not look forward to the Days of Allah: It is for Allah to recompense (45:14)." The meaning of this text is unclear, but it does point to a limited willingness to forgive those who do not believe in the same things.

The *hadith* literature yields some interesting ideas on forgiveness and conflict resolution as well. *Malik's Muwatta* states, "Every Muslim forgives except a man who has enmity between him and his brother. Leave these two until they have made reconciliation. (47.4.17), and the following text adds, "Leave these two until they turn in *tawba*." Now it seems to me, and I could be wrong, that this text refers to a fellow Muslim. But whether, under what circumstances, and according to whose interpretation, it could be extended to Muslim-non-Muslim relations is an important hermeneutic challenge for Islamic peacemakers. Clearly, however, the forgiveness is not simply an internal act, but rather an external act of reconciliation that parallels an inner process.

It is this proactive element that is important to highlight here, as we did in Judaism. Just as there must be an active interaction of human repentance and Divine forgiveness, here too, human forgiveness is inextricably related to a process that has both internal and external, formal aspects. On the internal level, the *hadith* stress anger as a key impediment to forgiveness and reconciliation. [\[32\]](#) It is not considered *halla* [\[33\]](#) to shun one's brother for more than three days. The shunning is attributed variously to envy, anger, suspicion, spying, and competition (*Malik's Muwatta* 47.4.13-16). The better of the two people greets his fellow first. Shaking of

hands is considered an important act that cures the rancor. Thus, there are specific symbolic/ethical acts, such as being the first to greet and shaking hands, that provided important clues to this deep, cultural process of reconciliation and forgiveness which stem from the oldest strata of Islamic culture.

Finally, charity, as a critical even primary element of Islam, is a key method of conflict resolution. Charitableness, even when justice may demand retaliation, or in this case compensation for loans, is seen as a key method of conflict resolution. Specifically, generosity in debt disputes that were arbitrated by Muhammad, was seen as a central way to bring about peace (*Hadith Sahih Bukhari* 3.49.868-870).

The proactive element in forgiveness and reconciliation that we have seen in Islam has old monotheistic roots, as we have demonstrated in Judaism. But it is also rooted in the old Arab method of reconciliation referred to as *sulha*. George Irani refers to several Arab methods of dealing with conflicts, including *wasta* (patronage-mediation), and *tahkeem* (arbitration). [34] *Sulh*, which Irani translates as “settlement”, and *muslaha*, which Irani translates as “reconciliation”, are rituals that are formally institutionalized in Arab cultural institutions of the past, as well as the present, to some degree. *Sulh* is understood to be conducted between believers, and is a form of contract, legally binding on both sides. According to some authorities, *salaam* carries the connotation of permanent peace, whereas *sulh* may be temporary, but could lead to permanent peace. In any case, it is action and ritual oriented. [35] Public *sulh*, according to one Jordanian expert, is conducted between large groups, such as tribes, whether or not the original parties to the conflict are known or are still present, historically speaking. Permanent peace among them requires compensation for those who have suffered the most, and a pledge from all the parties to forget everything and create a new relationship. Private *sulh* takes place

between known parties, and the purpose is to avoid the cycle of revenge. If, for example, a murder is committed, the families go to *muslihs* or *jaha* (those who have esteem in the community). A *hodna* (truce) is declared. [\[36\]](#)

The task of the *sulh* is not to judge, according to Irani, but to preserve the good name of both families and reaffirm the ongoing relationships of the community. This has, what Mennonite peacemakers refer to, as a restorative quality to it, that suggests that the process is much more than a judgement of who is right and wrong. Nevertheless, this judgement does occur, and the process is an arbitrated one. If one party is guilty of something as serious as murder, for example, there may be *diya* (blood money) that must be paid in order to avoid bloodshed. Finally there is a formal process of *muslaha*, a very public event in the village center. The families line up, the parties shake hands (*musafaha*), the family of the perpetrator may visit the family of the injured or murdered, and they drink bitter coffee (in some traditions it is *mumalaha* [partaking of salt and bread]). Finally, the family of the offender hosts a meal.

There are many important elements in this process. The use of symbolism is critical. The ritual use of food and the body for the handshake are key, involving all the senses, and especially touch between the parties. The bilateral way in which the parties relate, each with its own assigned symbolic role, is critical, and plays the role that all ritual plays in critical turning points of life and death. It gives the parties an ordered universe of peace, predictability and security, when this is precisely what the violence or offense stole from them.

The contractual element of this process is critical here to the culture. Treaties of an oral or custom-based nature are important to Middle Eastern cultures, and could

and should play a role in any inter-cultural process of Middle Eastern peacemaking. [\[37\]](#)

I have heard from Palestinian friends that there is also a version of *sulh* involving the offending party going to the house of the offended, removing his shirt, placing a dagger on his folded shirt, and bowing his head, symbolically offering or forfeiting his life. This is an extraordinary act of apology and surrender. It is the kind of apology for injury that reverses in absolute terms the circumstances of the injury. It places the offender in mortal vulnerability before the victim, and it is brilliant in its psychological depth. It empowers the victim, or restores his sense of self, in an absolute and dramatic symbolic fashion that leaves no room for ambivalence and suspicion. It would be like post-war Germany choosing a representative body of German Jews, of those who were left, to function as the leadership of Germany's national police force. It would have been more effective for everyone on both sides, in my estimation, than financial payments to Israel. Or it would be like the United States Congress choosing in 1900 to appoint a commission of Native American tribal Elders to oversee the management of federal lands, and oversee land-based disputes.

These examples involve the conduct of *sulh* when there is one guilty party. Of course, it is the nature of complex conflicts that there is usually a large amount of injury to innocents and crimes on both sides, and usually it is lopsided in ways that the combatants can never agree upon. Although it is possible that combatants can agree on specific crimes on both sides that are regrettable and/or subject to restitution and processes of reconciliation and apology. Thus, how *sulh* could be applied to complex conflicts is an interesting question. Furthermore, applying *sulh* to inter-cultural and inter-religious conflicts is certainly a challenging question. There is the obvious

problem of religious authorities, on both sides in fact, calling into question the orthodoxy of extending the process in this way. But there is also a deeper question of how and whether the symbolic process can be meaningful when it has primordial roots for only one side. A syncretistic process, typical of modern inter-faith experimentation would only be appealing to some, and probably appalling to the most religiously conservative on both sides, who probably need the process of reconciliation more than most. Thus, the problems of application are clear.

One group that is creatively applying *sulh* to contemporary situations, at least among Palestinians, is the Christian-based Wi'am Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center in Bethlehem. [\[38\]](#) I have also been involved with a West Bank rabbi who is in close contact with Islamic leaders, even among Hamas, and at least one element of *sulh*, namely *hodna*, has come up as a possible first step in improving Jewish-Islamic relations, as noted earlier. Furthermore, there are various quiet discussions taking place between religious Jews and Muslims on this subject. In fact, it was reported that a young Jewish man, whose car hit someone in the West Bank became involved in a process of *sulh*, but I have been unable to find the source for this story.

There are intra-cultural anecdotes of *sulh*, even in battle-torn Hebron. One young man who had attacked another Arab young man came to the house of the victim, apologized and kissed him on both cheeks. The alternative offered by the police was two nights in jail. After the apology they served tea. If it were a more serious crime they would have served bitter coffee! [\[39\]](#) Note that there is a coercive quality here, in that engaging in this ceremonial process is an alternative to more serious punishment. Now does this disqualify it as conflict resolution, or is *sulh* actually a quasi-legal phenomenon, a form of arbitration that is less effective than freely entered processes of conflict resolution, but more personal and effective

than the Western court model of justice? Furthermore, is the whole question of “effectiveness” culturally determined? Or does human needs theory and conflict transformation’s insistence on filling the need for empowerment make quasi-coercive strategies of arbitration like *sulh* less desirable than freely entered into conflict resolution processes? This is something that we must continue to debate.

If there were no police structure backing up the procedure, it has been argued that the incentive to compliance would exist anyway in old Arab culture, in terms of avoiding the cycle of revenge; on the other hand, if people were that rational we would never have violence. This invites serious reflection on the interaction of apology/forgiveness processes, issues of justice, enforcement of the law, and the balance of justice and peacemaking. Clearly, many of these matters devolve into situational and cultural calculations of what is right and appropriate, and what can be done, as opposed to what could be done in an ideal universe.

How this would apply to situations of massive wrongdoing and injury to large groups of people, even over generations, is a more complex affair. Most descriptions of *sulh* that I have seen presume, in classic court style, that there is one guilty party, although the written literature on this may not reflect the subtle variations of its lived reality at the hands of elders and arbitrators. But this is not the nature of long-standing inter-ethnic culture, where there is usually extensive injury on both sides, and recognizing this is half the battle of conflict resolution. Certainly, these village-based methods could not automatically translate into applicability to complex conflicts facing the Middle East. However, they may prove to be, in altered form, a crucial adjunct or parallel process to formal negotiations over matters of justice, war and peace, that speak to peoples’ hearts and deeper needs in a way that virtually nothing currently proposed by diplomacy is accomplishing.

I have been involved in recent months in a concerted effort to elicit the beginnings of a reconciliation process between Jewish and Islamic clerical leadership. It is certainly leading to statements of reconciliation or peacefulness that may or may not see the light of day, depending on the security of the parties involved. Forgiveness ceremonies, apologies, *sulha* and *teshuva*-type ceremonies, remain only a theoretical possibility at this point, but we are closer than ever to preparing the political/religious ground for such a possibility. The symbolic and transformative power of leading sheikhs and rabbis embracing in such a ceremony is an image that drives all of us forward in this difficult work, because we believe that this is the missing ingredient of the so-called peace process. It is the human element that is needed to transform this bitter, merciless, haggling struggle into a deeper process of trust-building, honest bilateral conversations about justice, and even reconciliation. It behooves us to work strenuously now to provide possible models of how this could occur. We want especially to guide this process in such a way that it truly responds to the human needs expressed on all sides, so that peacemaking and its cultural ceremonialization does not undermine deep conflict resolution and the pursuit of just solutions to complex wars.

In sum, we have explored the various parameters and uses of forgiveness in Judaism and Islam, and, to some degree, in the lived experience of Christianity. It is clear that there is potential in all three religions for this phenomenon of forgiveness to prove important in processes of conflict resolution. However, there are several major conditions, particularly if we are to think of this in terms of the deadly conflicts facing the Middle East:

1. Religious forgiveness must be seen in the context of a range of other religious moral values, such as justice, in order for it to work well with our basic

understanding today of what truly resolves conflicts and stops deadly violence in the long-term.

2. Assuming #1, it can still be said that there are times when an act that involves apology, remorse, forgiveness should stand on its own as a powerful symbol of a stage in relationship building. Forgiveness need not at every moment be tied justice, because its powerful psychological--spiritual if you like--impact drives the process forward toward rational negotiations about justice, power-sharing and fair solutions.

3. Timing in forgiveness-type activities (apology, remorse, symbolic reconciliation, gestures of repentance and restitution, unilateral forgiving, expressions of care) is critical, and it varies from culture to culture. Generally speaking, most people are prepared for acts of forgiveness in the context of some progress in justice issues, as a kind of glue that binds rational processes to the hearts of the parties. Conversely, forgiveness too early is offensive to many injured parties. But in some cultures and in some intractable situations, it seems that forgiveness-type activities are actually the first, not the last, activity, in that they break the psychological impasse to rational negotiation.

4. Religious forgiveness must be understood and honored in its indigenous culture/religious formulations. Of course, an honest look at the latter will lead to some internal debate, a hermeneutic debate that will be laden with a psychological substratum of struggle over how much to forgive an enemy. But it will be a good debate, in that it will affirm and empower the cultures in question rather than stifling them. The last thing that we want to do with cultural representatives who embrace violence is give them a reason for more violence when they see their own cultural approaches to problems being suppressed. On the contrary, honoring their culture is a key ingredient of effective conflict resolution.

5. Once, all sides have a reasonable comfort with their own cultural expressions, they have several choices as peacemaking proceeds. They could limit contact with the enemy group to formal negotiations without any cultural content, they could invite their enemy group into their own cultural expression of forgiveness, they could agree to be a part of their enemy's cultural expression of forgiveness, or they could negotiate about how to alternate cultural/religious expressions of forgiveness. I do not recommend synthesis but alternation, unless there is a cultural symbol that is so shared by both groups that a shared ceremony or symbol would not threaten identities on either side.

6. Religious forgiveness should never be exclusively verbal, unless it is within a culture in which words are the sole determinants of authentic relationship. But I have never encountered such a culture, at least when you move past the minority of the cultural elite. Actions, symbolic actions, surprising gestures, ceremonies and rituals are vital for most people on the planet who feel deep injury. For many, if not most, it is the *only* kind of reconciliation that they seem able to handle. This is especially true in many families. Thus, while in some ideal universe of psychological healing it would be better if everyone could place into words what their adversaries need most to hear, we should not consequently eliminate from conflict resolution the vast majority of humanity who cannot bring themselves to say the words "I am sorry" to an enemy. There are many other modes of forgiveness to be utilized that will lessen violence, restore everyone to a dignified life based on just solutions, and even create reconciliation. And that is our sole aim.

7. Forgiveness must be a critical adjunct to rational negotiations and justice seeking, because in virtually every long-standing conflict that I have ever seen, from families all the way to genocides, there is never complete justice, no way to recover

the lost lives, the lost time, and the emotional scars of torture and murder. And there is rarely the possibility of achieving everything each group envisioned at the height of struggle and battle. Thus, in the context of mourning what can not be restored, forgiveness and the creation of new bonds with those who one fought is a vital form of comfort for irrecoverable losses. It offers the possibility of a new matrix, a new cognitive and emotive structure of reality that can not replace the losses but does create a surprisingly new reason to live nonviolently and believe that such a life can be worth living. People recovering from genocide and guilty over their survival, people who have been forfeiting their sons' lives for generations, often need a jolt, an unexpected reason that they may be able to live normally, a reason to believe that a new way of life is not only possible but will actually be better than continuing to mourn their losses and punish those who inflicted those losses. Forgiveness processes can be the soul that animates this new vision of reality in the heart of those who have suffered for so long.

[1] See Michael Henderson, *The Forgiveness Factor* (London: Grosvenor Books, 1996).

[2] Of course, this is not just a Christian notion. It has old Jewish roots, though it is certainly not as dogmatically central to Jewish belief and practice, as is the death of Jesus for the sake of forgiveness. There is an ancient idea that the death of the righteous atones for the sins of a generation. See *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber ed.) *ahre mot* 10. As far as collective versus individual responsibility, this is a complex issue. On the one hand Exodus states that God visits the sins of the fathers on the sons (20:5; 34:7), whereas Deuteronomy 24:16 (as well as II Kings 14:6) explicitly states that the sons should never die for the sins of the fathers. One harmonizing hermeneutic of this paradox may be that the latter texts may address human forms of punishment while the former refers to Divine retribution. But it may reflect countervailing Biblical trends. The Hebrew Bible does have a tendency to hold accountable and to

punish whole groups for the sins of the majority of that group, such as the Sodomites, the Egyptians, Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, Canaanites, and so on. Sometimes the punishment is permanent, and sometimes for a few generations, but it is definitely a collective punishment.

[3] See *Dimensions of Forgiveness: Psychological Research and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Everett L. Worthington (Templeton Foundation Press: Philadelphia & London, 1998). This has become a popular subject as well. See Ellen Michaud, "Add Years to Your Life: Learn to Forgive," *Prevention* (January, 1999), who cites the work of Enright, among others, one of the principal proponents of forgiveness.

[4] Robert D. Enright and Catherine T. Coyle, "Researching the Process Model of Forgiveness Within Psychological Interventions," in *Dimensions of Forgiveness*, p. 142.

[5] K.R. Meek, J.S. Albright & M.R. McMinn, "Religious Orientation, Guilt, Confession, and Forgiveness," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 23 (1995), pp. 190-197, as cited in *Dimensions of Forgiveness*, pp. 264-266.

[6] See, for example, *The Psychodynamics of International Relationships*, eds. V. Volkan, J. Montville, & D. Julius (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990).

[7] Exodus 34:7. This verse is said countless times on the holiest day of the Jewish year, the Day of Atonement, and is emphasized as the most important characteristic of God.

[8] There are numerous sources in the Torah (I use the term interchangeably with the Hebrew Bible). See, eg., Micah 7:18-20. For Allah as merciful, see in the Qur'an, Surahs 6:26; 5:74; 15:49; 16:119. For Allah as forgiving, see 4:25; 5:74; 85:14.

[9] Talmud Bavli (henceforth T.B.) 133b

[10] The last phrase is a translation of *zekhuyot* in this context only.

[11] T.B. Yoma 86b

[12] [ibid.](#)

[13] See, for example, Malachi 3:7; Zech. 1:7, and the important discussion in Ezekiel 18. On the rabbinic side, see the *Amidah* of Yom Kippur, s.v. *Elokenu, ve'eloke avotenu, mehal*, in the standard Mahzor of Yom Kippur. This prayer is said every year on the Day of Atonement, many times. It reflects the notion of continuous forgiveness in response to the need every year to “wipe away” the sins of the people.

[14] *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985)

[15] This nuance is captured by the verb *maha*. See Ps. 51:3. It is also often associated with the washing away of sin.

[16] Many texts, including Micah 7: 18-20, emphasize the Divine quality of infinite patience, *erekh apayim*. The daily standing prayer, the *Amidah*, refers to God as a *mohel ve'soleakh*, a Being whose essential quality or name is Forgiver and Pardoner. This emphasizes that forgiveness is built into a permanent relationship between God, the individual, and the community.

[17] See Micah 7:18; Proverbs 19:11.

[18] T.B. Hagigah 5a; T.B. Berachot 12b

[19] Avot of Rabbi Nathan 40:5, statement of Rabbi Elazar ben Rabbi Yossi.

[20] T.B. Shabbat 105b

[21] T.B. Berachot 5b

[22] T.B. Yoma 86b; *Otzar Midrashim*, Gadol u'Gedulah 6.

[23] There seems to be a parallel structure of the moral human trait of *ma'aver al middotav*, occurring in early rabbinic literature (T.B. Ta'anit 25b), and the Divine quality of *ma'aver al pasha*, the wiping away of sin. In both cases, Divine and human, it involves a kind of surrender of rightful indignation in order to achieve a higher moral

goal of compassion and, above all, patience. See *Orhot Tzadikim* (n.d.; rpt. Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1946), chapter 4, 8, and 12.

[24] *Orhot Tzadikim*, chapter 4, 8, and 12

[25] Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, *Tomer Devorah* (rpt. New York: Feldheim, 1993), chapter 1, pp. 7-11. Cordovero continues (ad loc, pp. 17-19) with the effectiveness of never perpetuating one's anger. Citing Exodus 23:5 on the Biblical commandment to help one's enemy, he quotes T.B. Pesachim 113b, which suggests that the anger that one party feels to the other in this text is due to the fact that A witnessed B committing a crime, but does not have a second witness, and thus cannot bring B to justice. This makes A hate B. But the Bible instructs the believer to help this criminal with his burden anyway, as a gesture of love, in order to help B literally leave behind (a Midrashic re-reading of the phrase *azov ta'azov* in the Biblical verse) his sin. Thus, Cordovero applies this process of reconciliation even to those who one sees as violators of the norms of society or the norms of the Torah.

[26] *Orhot Tzadikim*, chapter 4. But see the previous note where Cordovero explicitly avoids this rather bifurcated, even schizophrenic, approach to the complex world of human failings. The problem with Cordovero's approach is not *Orhot Tzadikim's* bifurcated approach to the world that keeps pro-social values reserved only for those who have been deemed righteous by some human power structure. The problem is the implied limitation of many of these methods of interaction to fellow Jews. See *TomerDevorah*, op. cit., 13-17. This is an old crux in Jewish tradition, and is extended to the other monotheistic faiths. In all of them, traditional ethical language usually circumscribes many of the most important ethical principles to fellow believers, "those who accept Allah", or who call themselves Muslims, or those who are "brothers and sisters in the body of Christ", and so forth. It certainly affects the ethical values that today would be vital in establishing universal human rights. This is the essential problem of a group that has a "special" relationship to God. And yet, I have argued elsewhere that we cannot escape the need of ethnic groups, and the need of religious groups, to feel special, unique. Ethical values for most people cannot be simple Kantian categorical propositions. There must be special categories of care for those to whom one feels closer. The problem is that in many traditional structures this results in serious prejudice and double standards. Thus, what we suggest here is to study the pro-social side of these traditions when it comes to forgiveness and peacemaking,

evaluate its effectiveness, and argue, if appropriate, for a widening of the application of these values to non-believers. Many believers today would welcome that, while others will fiercely reject this. But this is a much larger problem with religious ethics and conflict that I have begun to address elsewhere. See Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of Religion, Violence and Peacemaking* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

[27] See *The Holy Qur'an*, ed. and trans. 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali (Brentwood, MD: Amana Corp., 1989), Surah 2:109, n. 110. Scholars should investigate the connection between this last notion of Divine forgiveness as a covering and the Biblical and rabbinic notion of *over al pasha*, or *moheh pasha*, mentioned above.

[28] See Rabia Terri Harris, "Nonviolence in Islam: The Alternative Community Tradition," in *Subverting Hatred: The Challenge of Nonviolence in Religious Traditions*, ed. D. Smith-Christopher (Boston: Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, 1998), pp. 95-114.

[29] Bawa Muhaiyaden, *Islam and World Peace: Explanations of a Sufi* (Philadelphia: The Fellowship Press, 1987), p. 34, as cited in Harris, *ad loc*, p. 111. Muhaiyadeen is a Sri Lankan, and thus a minority caught in the middle of larger Hindu-Buddhist violence. This is striking, and confirms for me, as do other cases, that ideal peacemakers emerge as minorities in situations where larger forces battle each other. This often gives the sensitive religious observer a unique perspective from which to interpret his/her own tradition.

[30] On the importance of empowerment in conflict resolution, or specifically the conflict transformation, see B. Bush and J. Folger, *The Promise of Mediation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

[31] *Avot of Rabbi Nathan* 23:1.

[32] Yahya related to me from Malik that Yahya ibn Said said that he heard Said ibn al-Musayyab say, "Shall I tell you what is better than much prayer and *sadaqa*?" They said, "Yes." He said, "Mending discord. And beware of hatred - it strips you (of your *deen*)."
Malik's Muwatta 47.1.17

[33] *hallal* is also a word referring to Islamic food that is considered acceptable for eating. Once again the parallels of the lived religion of Judaism and Islam are extraordinary. *Kosher* is the proper word regarding Jewish food that can be legally eaten. But it also used both rabbinically, and in today's lived Judaism, as a phrase referring to ethical issues. A *koshere yid* in Yiddish is a Jew who is a good, God-fearing person.

[34] George Irani, "Rituals of Reconciliation: Arab-Islamic Perspectives," Delivered at the United States of Peace (unpublished), p. 3. See also Elias Jabbour, *Sulha: Palestinian Traditional Peacemaking Process* (House of Hope, 1996).

[35] Irani, p. 27.

[36] I should mention that in my consultation with Rabbi Menahem Froman, a West Bank rabbi who has been deeply involved in Jewish-Islamic reconciliation, that he spoke with certain radical leaders, who I will not name, about peace, and they responded with the possibility of declaring a *hodna* between Jews and Arabs on the West Bank. Now skeptics, and those in the Jewish community who have no trust of the Arab and Islamic community immediately see in this a trick, not authentic peace, a legal gimmick but no real acceptance. But Froman, understanding the subtlety of religious legal categories and hermeneutics and trust-building, was quite eager to embrace a stage by stage process of religious treaties. He did not see it as a trick, but as a first step that naturally could legally be reneged on, as all first steps can be abrogated, but a step that would be a significant advance on the road to trust. Personal Interview, Menahem Froman, Tekoa, West Bank, April, 1998.

[37] Mohammed Abu-Nimer regularly conducts conflict resolution training in which he has the members of the group sign a contract to whatever principles that they agree as a group will govern their training class. This is a fascinating hermeneutic reworking of a traditional context. The traditional context of culture takes for granted rules of cultural engagement that have always been assumed by everyone, and the process of *sulh* ritualizes it. When Abu-Nimer conducts his training with people who may or may not be traditional, who may or may not share any cultural principles, he effectively recreates or creates anew a culture of the classroom, based upon his contractual model of human social integrity. Observations based on co-teaching with Abu-Nimer. Abu-Nimer has struggled with this

question of contract. See his “Conflict Resolution in an Islamic Context,” *Peace and Change* 21:1 (Jan. 1996), 22-40.

[38] See <http://www.planet.edu/~alaslal>. They claim to have mediated over a thousand disputes, resolving 87% of them. *Sulha* figures prominently in their literature, and they seem to have a good reputation. Not surprisingly, the larger conflict of Israelis and Palestinians, or Jews and Christians and Muslims, is addressed less successfully in their literature. The Israelis are referred to collectively as “the Oppressor” and Palestinians as “the oppressed”. The Israeli soldiers are referred to as “toy soldiers” of the Oppressor. Of course, the dehumanized language depicting the enemy hardly reflects the subtle attention to conflict resolution psychology that the rest of their literature reflects. This is unfortunate, and it reflects the general failure of the conflict resolution community to intervene in any effective way that humanizes both sides of this conflict. This kind of dehumanized language is understandable and even expected from victims of oppression, no matter what their conflict resolution training may be. But it is less forgivable from the outside community of religious peacemakers who, with a paltry few, un-funded exceptions, have truly failed to become an effective bridge of peacemaking, unlike their role among warring Christians in Ireland, for example. Thus, peacemakers who are religious have trouble extending their wisdom beyond their own religious/tribal/cultural affiliations. This is one of our principal challenges and ongoing failings in terms of conflict resolution practice. Just as an interesting technical exercise, one will find, in tracing the “hits” that one finds on Infoseek, that Mennonite Central Committee cites enthusiastically the religious work of *sulha*, and the work of Wi’am as a Christian Palestinian organization. I will be glad to proven wrong, but I have found no links between MCC and Rabbis for Human Rights, or Oz ve-Shalom, or the Open House in Ramle established and directed by Yehezkel and Dalia Landau at enormous personal sacrifice, in other words, with Jewish religious peacemakers. There is actually some good Jewish-Christian peace work taking place in Israel, with the Catholic Church and other bodies, through various progress inter-faith organizations, as well as some joint study ventures. Curiously, however, the historic Peace Churches are largely absent from this relationship-building process. Israelis note this well and, therefore, often will tell me that they do not see them as peace churches at all. In fact, they want nothing to do with them. That is a sad, wasteful, and useless division between Christian and Jewish religious peacemakers, and speaks

volumes as to why conflict resolution and mediation for the Arab/Israeli conflict are so underdeveloped by Western peacemakers at the present time.

[\[39\]](#) Report e-mailed by Christian Peacemaker Teams, Hebron, 3/7/97.