

The Science of Forgiveness

BY KATHERYN RHOADS MEEK

The concept of forgiveness no longer falls solely under the umbrella of religious thought. Social scientists are beginning to recognize the powerful practical and therapeutic benefits that forgiveness offers in a broken and isolated world.

Forgiveness is a concept deeply rooted within a faith context. Indeed, in the Bible forgiveness is the most crucial concept, the basis for relational healing both horizontally (within community) and vertically (with God). Historically, the study of forgiveness fell under the purview of pastors and other religious leaders who have long known the powerful healing benefits that come with both giving and receiving forgiveness. Lives are transformed as hope takes the place of guilt, anger, loneliness, and fear, as relationships are restored, and the love of God transforms a life. However, all who struggle to grant forgiveness in the face of grave injustice recognize that forgiving is difficult. Consider the atrocities committed in the name of racial superiority, the daily abuse and murder of children around the world, the anger that cries for revenge and retribution in the face of great evil. Within these examples lie real people for whom the pain of injury is so grave that the hope offered through forgiveness appears as only a pipe dream. Yet religious leaders have consistently maintained that forgiveness is both required and provides the foundation for a new community of hope.

Since the late 1980's they have been joined by social scientists, with varying faith commitments, seeking to understand and implement the power of forgiveness in society at large. The Campaign for Forgiveness Research cites recent studies showing that the practice of forgiveness is directly related to emotional healing and the building of peaceful communities. The practical and therapeutic effects of forgiveness are far

ranging, and can be seen in various personal and social contexts: among Vietnam veterans coping with post-traumatic stress disorders; among victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence; among HIV/AIDS patients; and among the diverse clusters of people facing end-of-life issues. Given the link between health and forgiveness, is it any wonder that many people now think forgiveness can reduce the severity of heart disease, prolong the life of cancer patients, and reduce levels of crime (by quenching the desire for revenge)?

Everett Worthington brings together in *Dimensions of Forgiveness: Psychological Research & Theological Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 1998) diverse essays that draw out scientifically the links between the practice of forgiveness and personal and social health. His main purpose is to present “research into the scientific foundations of effective living—how positive mindsets and virtues enhance the lives of individuals and, ultimately, the well-being of society” (p. ix). The authors who were invited to contribute to the ten chapters represent many of the premier thinkers and researchers into the areas surrounding the religion and psychology of forgiveness. Worthington organizes the chapters around five major themes: forgiveness in religion, forgiveness in basic social processes, forgiveness in interventions, forgiveness in published research, and forgiveness in future research. I will attempt to draw attention to some of the relevant strengths of each chapter, specifically as they relate to practical applications in real world situations.

Though the first section of the book, “Forgiveness in Religion”, includes chapters entitled “The Ethos of Christian Forgiveness” and “The Elements of Forgiveness: A Jewish Approach”, the aim is not to ground the concept of forgiveness within a Judeo-Christian perspective. Martin Marty’s chapter entitled “The Ethos of Christian Forgiveness” clearly acknowledges that though “much of forgiveness history derives from Hebrew roots and Scriptures” the idea of forgiveness goes well beyond the borders of any particular religious confession. In fact he states that while the concept of forgiveness is “spread through many religions . . . it does not even demand a religious context in the first place.” This chapter is somewhat heady and at times difficult to get through, and those reading from an evangelical Christian perspective are likely to find themselves scratching their heads with some of his conclusions regarding the history (i.e., Biblical interpretation) and meaning of forgiveness. In contrast, Elliot Dorff’s chapter delineating a Jewish approach to forgiveness is both educational and readable. He provides a real world case example (of two groups of adolescent boys in conflict no less) from which he outlines specifically how the Jewish faith addresses all the elements of forgiveness, including issues of justice, vengeance, repentance, duty, reparation, and

reconciliation. He describes the process through which he attempted to lead these boys in forgiving their enemies. Dorff is particularly adept at addressing how God's intrinsic nature, comprised of both mercy and justice, co-exist and work together to promote God's ideal community.

The section titled "Forgiveness in Basic Social Processes" provides two chapters that contain insight into why people may choose forgiveness and alternatively why they may choose to remain victims. Kenneth Pargament and Mark Rye look at motivations for choosing to forgive others, primarily settling on the notion that people choose forgiveness as a means to cope with stress, injury, and pain. They make a convincing argument for understanding forgiveness within its religious context, citing empirical evidence that strongly supports this connection. They state, ". . . it may be very difficult to remove forgiveness from its spiritual context; in fact, the notion of a secular forgiveness . . . may be, for many people, an oxymoron" (p.69). These authors also challenge researchers to understand their own biases when attempting to understand a concept that for many people represents a religious value more than simply a coping mechanism designed to increase emotional well-being. In other words, they freely acknowledge the limitations of social scientists at grasping the full meaning of religious pursuits in their attempts to understand human behavior. In chapter four Roy Baumeister and his colleagues turn to the equally important topic of what might prevent people from choosing forgiveness. Among other issues they touch on is the appeal of remaining in the victim role and all the benefits which that stance may entail: personal advantages of pride and revenge, of not condoning the offense or setting oneself up for continued offenses, and of holding a grudge. They make a helpful distinction between the inner decision to choose forgiveness and the relational dimension of forgiveness if and when the victim chooses to relate to the perpetrator. Unfortunately, the authors of this chapter appear to make

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forgiveness contingent upon the magnitude of the injury. Though they correctly acknowledge that forgiveness is a process that often takes a great deal of time, they also assert, "the magnitude and duration of the consequences should help determine forgiveness" (p. 94). While it is certainly true that the cost of forgiveness is in many cases perceived by people to be very high, which helps explain (as the authors note) why

many people are slow to forgive, it is always important to recognize that in most instances the perceived costs are based on a misunderstanding of what forgiveness means. Forgiveness does not guarantee reconciliation. It does not necessarily eliminate continued suffering or take away the consequences of another's act. Forgiveness is not condoning or excusing the offense, nor is it an acknowledgement of weakness. As the International Forgiveness Institute at the University of Wisconsin at

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Madison suggests, we should distinguish between forgiveness that refers to an individual's moral response to an injustice suffered, and reconciliation that refers to two or more parties coming together in mutual respect.

Section three of the book considers different models of promoting

forgiveness with people who have been injured. Can something like "steps to forgiveness" be taught that will make the process of forgiveness a wider-spread practice? Researchers have suggested several steps, including some of the following moments: a careful examination of the situation, acknowledging and dealing with the fact that victims have been injured; making attempts to empathize with the offenders; an effort toward generating humility in victims as well as offenders, in considering their own transgressions and desire for forgiveness; and so on. Clearly, many models or programs could be devised that would assist us in becoming more forgiving. As Christians, however, we might ask whether or not these models spring from something more than a vague description of mental health, and if they finally lead to concrete forms of life that reflect God's own triune life of peace and love.

While the first two chapters in section three outline process models designed to teach people to forgive, there is a great deal of overlap in the models, and the chapters may be difficult to get through for those who are not trained as social scientists. I particularly recommend chapter seven, titled "Science and Forgiveness Interventions: Reflections and Recommendations". This chapter not only highlights the models presented in the previous two chapters in a succinct manner, it also is the first to directly resist the notion that forgiveness interventions can be blind to cultural differences. The authors challenge us to remember the danger of

attempting to scientifically study a complex and deeply personal cultural and religious phenomenon such as forgiveness. This is the age-old problem that is endemic to scientific research. Is a scientific lab similar to real world situations? Can people really lead others through a process of forgiveness sans cultural and religious elements, measure the results, and call the intervention successful for all people facing similar issues? While most ethical researchers would agree that this is not possible, the authors of this chapter do make the point that the majority of published work is based on a secular, individualistic, and Eurocentric understanding of forgiveness that makes generalizability difficult at best. Hopefully as more and more narratives are studied that stress the role of religious faith as the inspiration behind the practice of forgiveness, these research biases toward individualism and secularism may be overcome.

In section four of the book Michael McCullough, Julie Exline, and Roy Baumeister provide “An Annotated Bibliography of Research on Forgiveness and Related Topics”. This section summarizes and reviews, paper by paper, the published psychological literature on forgiveness and related concepts such as revenge, blame, apologies, and confession. While this section comprises a major portion of the book, it is an essential component for scientifically minded people who appreciate the interplay between theorizing about important concepts and testing them through empirical investigation.

I especially recommend the final chapter written by Lewis Smedes, who brings narratives of forgiveness to life. He effectively transmits to readers the hope inherent in making a lifelong commitment to pursue forgiveness. He does this by taking us on a journey from forgiveness to reconciliation with empathy, humility, and hope as our guides, without neglecting the uniqueness of situations in which forgiving is particularly difficult and reconciliation sometimes ill advised. In doing this he, more so than Martin Marty in the chapter “The Ethos of Christian Forgiveness”, connects the essence of forgiveness within a Christian perspective to the salvation offered by God.

This book can be an important resource on the scientific study of forgiveness. It provides some limited religious history, outlines where the field of psychology has been in studying forgiveness, and offers recommendations on how researchers ought to proceed. Some chapters will be more useful than others, to some degree depending on your specific purpose in reading about forgiveness.

If you want to learn more about the topic, visit the websites of the Templeton Foundation-funded “A Campaign for Forgiveness Research” (www.forgiving.org)—directed by Everett Worthington and endorsed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, President Jimmy Carter, and Harvard

psychologist Robert Coles—and the International Forgiveness Institute directed by Robert Enright (www.intl-forgive-inst.org). Another book to recommend is *Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice*, edited by Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament, and Carl E. Thoresen (New York: Guilford Publications, 1999. 334 pp.). These editors also invited leading researchers to write about the multiple dimensions of forgiveness research. The main strength of this book is the practical way the authors take a complex concept and apply it to specific situations (i.e., forgiveness in individual, marital, and pastoral care contexts) and cultural contexts (persons living with HIV/AIDS in India). This anthology, like Worthington's, makes it particularly clear that the concept of forgiveness no longer falls solely under the umbrella of religious thought. Social scientists are beginning to recognize the powerful practical and therapeutic benefits that forgiveness offers in a broken and isolated world.



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