

Robert E. Sawyer

First of all I want to express thanks to the editor, board, and author for choice of the theme. Forgiveness is mentioned a lot (“Oh, just forgive and forget,” or “Better to ask forgiveness than permission”). But few seem to really understand what forgiveness is.

I appreciate the biblical and theological dimensions of the essay. I appreciate the “contrast and compare” discussion of conflict resolution, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Margaret clearly ties mission to forgiveness in relating the results of the Moravians’ August 13, 1727, experience, and in noting that “in theology and the social sciences, reconciliation is described as a combination of justice and peace, or the restoration of right relationships.”

But a prior question loomed large for me: What is it that brings forgiveness into the life of a person who has been terribly wronged? Why is it that some who experience extreme discrimination, violence, and intentional deprivation respond with hatred and violence, while others take the path of forgiveness and reconciliation?

I find some answers in Margaret’s essay. Forgiveness, reconciliation, and making peace are not human creations but are the work of the Holy Spirit, so forgiveness is far more likely in the life of those who are spiritually alive and open to the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Seeing forgiveness modeled by others is a motivator. But I think there is another reason why some who have been terribly wronged can still forgive.

Margaret notes that forgiveness and reconciliation both have deep roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In our Christian tradition, forgiveness and reconciliation are grounded in Christ’s atoning death (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). In the broader tradition they are grounded in the understanding that every human being is created in the image of God, “only a little lower than God, and crowned with glory and honor” (Genesis 1 and Psalm 8).

Among the friends I have been privileged to know are three Palestinian Christian clergy: Melkite archbishop Elias Chacour, Lutheran bishop Munib Younan, and Lutheran pastor Mitri Raheb. One lives in the State of Israel, one in East Jerusalem, and one in the Occupied West Bank. I listen to and read their stories, and I readily understand how their experiences could have led to lives of bitterness and hatred rather than forgiveness and reconciliation. Why is forgiveness at the core of their lives and ministries?

They all speak of the essential dignity of every human being. Pastor Raheb wrote in *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, “To love one’s enemy means that despite the conflict one recognizes the enemy as a creature of God who has a right to live, to be forgiven, and to love—but not the right to commit an unjust act” (103). In his 2006 Easter message Bishop Younan wrote, “Our witness should be strong and simple: Our God is risen and calls us to live as people of the Resurrection, sisters and brothers in Christ and of creation, *caring for each human being with dignity and justice.*”

Archbishop Chacour writes about a day that he pondered the Beatitudes at the site where Jesus gave them. He got to the one about hungering and thirsting after righteousness, and he thought about Jesus' new understanding of righteousness. "The stiff laws of the Old Testament were only a shadow of the higher law of God's love that He had come to fulfill." Scenes of Jesus' ministry raced through his mind. There was forgiveness for the woman taken in adultery. The blind and the crippled were healed on the Sabbath. The Samaritan outcast became a person worthy of honor and concern.

"For one of the first things Jesus did when He reconciled man to God was to restore human dignity.... Suddenly I knew that the first step toward reconciling Jew and Palestinian was the restoration of human dignity" (*Blood Brothers*, 153).

Forgiveness and reconciliation are hard work and they require strength of character, a strong sense of one's own dignity and the dignity of the "other." Both insecurity and chauvinism are enemies of forgiveness.

Margaret touches on another question well worth exploring. "Can nations or groups forgive?" (See her Insert 1.) It's a discussion well beyond this response, but in my opinion, forgiveness by a group is possible, although extremely rare. The Southern Province Synod of 2006 took a step in that direction by adopting a resolution in which it "expresses its regret and apologizes to the African American community for the past participation of the Moravian Church in the institution of slavery." That was a good step and was well received by the community.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

in South Africa had national as well as individual dimensions and has been emulated in a number of other countries as well as at least one city (Greensboro, NC). In these and other contexts I think that the degree to which a group can forgive depends on the degree to which a group is truly a body or an organism, where group identity supersedes individuality. That means the church, the Body of Christ, is a place where forgiveness and reconciliation can indeed take place. Maybe Margaret's essay will move us along a bit further.

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Angelene Swart

Margaret Wilde did well in addressing the issue of forgiveness as it is very relevant. Forgiveness is a pressing need throughout the worldwide Moravian Unity.

I wish to share my experience as a South African who lived through years of oppression where hatred, anger, rage, and resentment built up within the hearts of the majority of the oppressed population.

With the demise of apartheid there was fear that after so much pain, hurt, torture, and degradation and so many inhumane acts of violence and death, forgiveness would be almost impossible or unacceptable for the victims. The ultimate aim of the newly-elected government