

Consensus

Volume 28

Issue 1 *Waterloo Lutheran Seminary Lutheran Life*
Lectures 1998-2001

Article 2

5-1-2002

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Recommended Citation

Elshtain, Jean Bethke (2002) "Politics and forgiveness," *Consensus*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol28/iss1/2>

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Lutheran Life Lecture
November 12, 1998
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Politics and Forgiveness

Good morning. Thank you very much. I want to thank Lutheran Life for sponsoring this lectureship. I know that I am following in distinguished footsteps, including those of my colleagues, Martin Marty from the University of Chicago Divinity School and Eberhard Bethke, a friend of mine who is also, as many of you know, the biographer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I also want to thank Tim Hegedus for picking me up at the airport and for the introduction, Dean Richard Crossman for his support in my coming, and Pastor Harris for use of this beautiful sanctuary. When I was in the pastor's office just before it was time to come out here, I noticed a framed quote from Luther on the wall. And I thought it was the sort of thing that one ought to jot down and remind oneself of before every public presentation. It is typically a Martin Luther sort of quote, so it has a little bite to it, and it goes like this, "If you feel or imagine that you are right and suppose that your book, teaching, or writing is a great achievement, then my dear man," and Luther would certainly include my dear woman, "feel your ears. If you are doing so properly you will find that you have a splendid pair of long, big, shaggy ass's ears." That's great isn't it? I'm going to remember and remind myself of this from time to time and feel my ears and hope they are not getting long and shaggy. Because I think that most of the issues that we talk about, that we are called upon to address, are not the purview of a small group of scholars, but in fact are, if you will, the concern of all of us; all of us as citizens, as we near the end of the century. This is certainly true of my work, and I have been much instructed by the comments and questions I have received as I go around talking about the sorts of things I talk about. So I am very happy that we have lots of time for discussion after I complete my formal remarks.

I am going to begin with a characterization of a situation which may fit the great republic to the south a bit more than it does Canada. But I think you will recognize some of the trends and tendencies that I identify at the outset of this discussion of politics and forgiveness. Now as you know, we are awash in confession these days. There is the low

form on daytime television talk shows. There is a slightly higher form in bookstores. Rectitude has given way to what one was called “contrition chic,” meaning a kind of bargain basement way to gain publicity and sympathy and even absolution by trafficking in one’s status as a victim, a victimizer, a sinner, and so on. And this confessional mode now extends at times to entire nations or peoples, where separating powerful, authentic acts and expressions of regret from empty gestures becomes even more difficult than it is on the level of individuals, one to another or one to the entire nation, as in the case of the President of the United States. Given the tawdry, shameless nature of so much of our popular culture, and the way in which it traffics in and cheapens notions of forgiveness and repentance (you all know some of the phrases, “Well, let’s just get this behind us,” “Let’s achieve closure,” and so on), it would be tempting to end the matter right here and to dismiss all acts of public contrition as somehow inauthentic. But that doesn’t seem quite right. Rather, what is required is to distinguish between instances of “contrition chic” and by contrast, serious acts of public or political forgiveness. What sorts of deeds warrant the solemn drama of forgiveness between nations or groups—for example, an activity with potentially far reaching consequences, by contrast to easier gestures undertaken in a diluted or even debased, if you consider afternoon talk shows, confessional mode? Now when the great political theorist Hannah Arendt called forgiveness the greatest contribution of Jesus of Nazareth to politics, she surely did not have in mind an individual figure crying, “Can you forgive me?” That wasn’t her point of emphasis. And obviously the spectacle I have already alluded to that unfolds every day on American television was very far from her mind. It is a spectacle she would have denounced as vulgar. Rather, she was gesturing toward a way, the only way, she claims in her great book *The Human Condition*, for repetitive cycles of vengeance to be broken; for the often deadly playing out of horrible deeds done and equally horrible vengeance or payback sought, to be disrupted by an unexpected act that opens up space for something new to begin, that alters the horizon of expectations in some way. This is the possibility, that bloody deeds will not haunt generation upon generation, dooming sons and daughters to repeat the sins of fathers and mothers. Now although individual acts of forgiveness, one human being to another, most often take place outside the full glare of publicity, there are others that are noteworthy for embodying an alternative to what I have called “contrition chic.” Here one thinks

of Pope John Paul II, who having barely survived an assassin's bullet, uttered his first public words from his hospital bed to the violent shooter, now described as "my brother whom I have sincerely forgiven"; words that preceded John Paul's extraordinary visit to his "brother" and would-be killer in jail once he was up and about. Now there is a gravity, a gravitas, manifest in this narrative that is altogether lacking in American, by which I mean United States, quasi-therapeutic talk show confessions that are most often blatantly self-exculpatory, rather than the way one professes a faith (Christianity in this instance), the faith within which forgiveness is a central and constitutive dimension. Now those, for whom forgiveness is a central and solemn affirmation, engage in what theologian L. Gregory Jones calls the practice or craft of forgiveness, in his book *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*. So Pope John Paul was practising this craft and in so doing displaying to the world the way in which forgiveness is not primarily about a singular confessional moment, but about an enactment within a particular way of life: a way of life shaped not by soggy sentimentalism, but by certain hard won and difficult truths. Now that having been said, it still seems a bit odd to think of John Paul's act of forgiveness as a political intervention per se; although it was an undeniably powerful moment, one seared in the memory and locked in the hearts of those who witnessed or read about it, even from afar through the medium of television and print news reports. Now to be sure there might have been political consequences. The Pope's powerful words and actions might have quieted the turbulent hearts of many believers who sought revenge more generally for his near murder. But again, I doubt this is quite what Hannah Arendt had in mind. She was more concerned with interrupting a flow of events that seems to be on automatic pilot; when mass murder, acts of retribution, then more acts of killing become just the way we do things around here, so to speak. Now within the frame of such broad based events, often driven by desperate political purpose, individuals who were shaped by the practice of forgiveness should try to practise what they believe or preach. But an individual cannot from himself or herself stem the rushing tide of violence (or such moments would be quite rare).

Are there then forms of authentic political forgiveness? Who forgives whom, and for what? Remember, forgiveness is not a one-way street, it implies a relationship; it is a transitive dimension. Forgiveness in general is not primarily about self-exculpation in any case, despite

popular distortion, but about the creation of a new relationship or order of things, or the restoration of an order of things or a relationship that has been broken or torn by violence, cruelty, and indifference. Forgiveness is also something quite different from aloofness or detachment, just not caring, which I think is sometimes mistakenly presented nowadays as a form of forgiveness. What is at stake, rather, is a tougher discipline by far, than our public acts of easy repentance sought, and something like forgiveness as a kind of willed amnesia, proffered. Now it is, I want here to suggest, very easy to get cynical, when one contrasts some of the stuff that we see unfolding in public life. Examples I offer here may not be that familiar to you.

There is a televangelist named Jimmy Swaggart who a few years ago was caught in a scandal, went on television, shed copious tears, and asked his flock to forgive him. That seems the sort of thing that probably should not be televised, minimally. It all seemed so much a part of an act that it was hard to know just how authentic the Rev. Swaggart was being at that point. This sort of thing (and we could proliferate so many similar examples) needs to be put in contrast to John Paul's forgiveness of a violent shooter. How does one sift such matters?

Political forgiveness must have a public dimension, for politics itself is public speech of a certain kind and it speaks to the good of persons in community. As well, when people sincerely try to make amends it would be small minded to withhold from them any possibility that what they say or do might make any difference in the future, including a difference in their public activities and public stance. Perhaps there is one key to our discussion here. The public repentance of a political figure, an act related to forgiveness, certainly, cannot simply be a matter of words. Words and deeds cannot be disentangled, "by their acts ye shall know them." Again, this is far easier to deal with and even to see on the level of individual transformation than anything like forgiveness between nation states, and warring political parties or factions. Because here the sheer weight and density of history seems at times intractable. How does one get past a particularly horrible series of events? Doesn't one have to punish people before one can move on? Forgiveness of a strongly political or public sort presumes communities, places, histories of a tangible concrete kind. Real issues are involved and the stakes are often high, up to and including entire peoples who are crying to heaven against specific injustices and horrors. So when Hannah Arendt lamented

the ways in which events take on a cyclical or repetitive quality, it was history or a particular version of it she had in her sights as a target.

Now people, as some of you may know, especially those of you who are students of history, are very fond of citing George Santayana's claim, that those who don't know their history are doomed to repeat it. But as I reflected on these issues it occurred to me that perhaps the reverse is more likely, namely, those who know their history too well may be doomed to repetition. Perhaps a certain amount of what I am going to call "knowing-forgetting," and then explain to you, is necessary in order to get out of the rut of repetition. If a people's collective horizon is limited to the re-encoding of past glories or horrors, the past eviscerates any possibility of future transformation. What we want is more of the same or presumably less of the same, but it is always the same. By "knowing-forgetting" then I have in mind a way to release present day actors from the full burden of the past in order that they not be weighed down by it utterly.

"Forgetting" in this case does not mean one falls into radical present-mindedness, and the delusion that the past counts for nothing. Rather, one assesses and judges just what the past does count for in the present, how much it should frame, shape, and even determine present events. So there is a dilemma here. Too much past overwhelms the future, but too little past, a kind of a-historicity, empties the future, it becomes just a blank slate, and it then empties the selves we carry into the future. Put another way, beings without memory would have no need for retribution, but they wouldn't have an identity either. So there is this very complex, very fraught line to walk. And here let me just reference for you a very interesting work by a philosopher named Patricia Cook, *The Philosophy of Forgetting: An Inquiry through Plato's Dialogues*. She notes in this work that the Greeks offered at least twelve different meanings for what it means to "forget." These included disregarding or blotting out of one's mind. But forgetting also included forgiveness of a wrong and a kind of amnesty. So when I'm talking about forgetting, it is not "blotting out" but it's the notion of a kind of "amnesty," a kind of partial relinquishment of the full burden of the past.

Too often these days, as I have already suggested, when forgiveness is mentioned, it gets translated into a kind of bland non-judgmentalism; the notion I can't say anything at all about anybody else's behaviour and words, because I am not perfect myself. But if this is the tack one takes, then forgiveness is altogether unnecessary. There can never be

anything to forgive if no real wrong has been suffered, no real sin committed, no evil deed perpetrated, no record of historic injustices mounted. There are certain tendencies in modern liberal culture that push us to move precisely the route of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace” in these matters. We are all invited to validate one another incessantly but never to offer correction and reproof, whether it’s on the level of individual relationships or in the wider social and political arena. One thinks here, for example, in my country at least, of the whole self-esteem movement. This movement is dedicated to the principle that any criticism and any insistence that certain norms or standards be upheld, is rejected as a form of harsh judgmentalism, rather than perhaps as a way that we encourage and inspire and try to call and to lift people up and hold them to a certain standard. The suggestion here is that only bland affirmations will help us to put everything behind us. But those practising the craft of forgiveness recognize in such bland, hence meaningless, affirmations, a flight from the hard work of forgiveness, rather than stirring examples of it. As well, thinking about forgiveness in public or political life involves painful recognition of the limits to forgiveness in the political realm, if what one seeks is full expiation or a full accounting or total justice or a kind of annihilation of the past. There are wrongs suffered that can never be put right. Indeed this recognition is itself a central feature of an overall structure of political forgiveness or so I want to suggest, for it opens up space for a person or a people to partially unburden themselves from the hold the past has on them.

Now here I will share a concrete but hypothetical example, and then I will move to some actual historic cases of what I have in mind; beginning with what might be called the individual political level and then going on to some tougher cases.

Suppose that a young woman becomes aware of the history of female inequality and all the many affronts and structures of encoded inequities to which women were subjected to in the past, including the history of her own culture. So a feminist consciousness dawns. How does this past weigh upon her? If the past is read reductively (that her past was what it always was about, and nothing else; as nothing but a story of women’s oppression), she too easily takes on the identity of a present-day victim; as if no forces have been involved in shaping her other than the sort of concatenated effects of male dominance and perfidy. If this happens she sees the world solely through the lens of victimhood.

And this I would submit is a particular temptation in a culture that specializes in creating “stock victims” and in which claims to victimization carry special resonance, rhetorically. In this regard, let me share an interesting story told by a friend of mine in sociology. Some experiments were done in which groups of American teenagers were told to separate themselves according to whether they thought they were completely powerless or had some power. And the result, you can guess, was that everyone wanted to be powerless; everyone, without exception. That is the identity of choice these days. No one wanted to admit he or she had any power of any kind. And I would submit that if everyone is powerless, and everyone somehow makes some claim to victimization, then real victims with their concrete, not abstract or ideological, claims are harder for us to see. And this in turn invites a politics of resentment and “grievance seeking” that often gets called justice.

But there is another possibility. Aware of these past wrongs, the young woman in question can become a champion of fairness and equity, understanding as she does that politically there are things that can be done to forestall future repetition of past wrongs from which women suffered. She can also recognize that the past is not simply a doleful tale of “nothing but,” as if no women were villains or heroes and no men anything other than villains. So the past is not forgotten, but it is kept alive as a tradition that must be engaged on-goingly. She understands that her twenty-year old male contemporary did not bring a previous structure of dominance and power into being. But she is also alert to the need to assess and judge his actions from the standpoint of current standards of fairness. Now this imposes a burden on her too: the burden of accountability, incumbent upon all free agents. Now is forgiveness involved in this latter scenario? Of a sort, in the sense that the young woman relinquishes part of the burden of the past or a highly ideological version of that past, not allowing it to define her within the vortex of a “fear-loathing-resentment” victim identity. So I would call this a form of “knowing-forgetting” that opens up a more capacious set of possibilities free from the corrosive poison of resentment.

There are many examples one could turn to here and there are some questions that are just so grey that they admit of no answer; not just no easy answer, but no clear answer. Let us now move to some tougher cases. How does a culture fully expiate for the holocaust? or for slavery? These are wrongs that cannot wholly be righted, I think we all understand

that. They must be acknowledged, and part of the acknowledgment will consist in a knowing and explicit articulation of the terrible fact that full expiation is impossible. There is nothing you could do to undo that or make up for it. You have to acknowledge your own inadequacy in this regard; not as a strategy of not doing anything, but as a recognition of human inadequacy when confronted with these kinds of horrors. So this is not forgetting as a type of collective amnesia. It is acknowledgment of the full scope of a given horror and the inability of a subsequent generation or generations, not themselves directly responsible for the horror, to put things right. The important thing is that the events stand. Acknowledgement of these events is required by those most directly implicated and even by those not directly implicated, who stood by and did nothing or who have to contend with the fact that this was something that happened in their own culture in their own country at a given time and place. So remembrance of violent deeds goes forward in all its fullness and detail. A recounting of events serves as an ongoing judgment of those most responsible tied at the same time to a tragic recognition that some wrongs cannot be righted. And politics is full of tragic recognition.

Now this must have been what Hannah Arendt had in mind, at least in part. In her controversial book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she justifies the hanging of Adolph Eichmann because he had perpetrated terrible crimes against humanity on the body of the Jewish people. But she did so in full recognition of the fact that no scale of justice had thereby been put right. And that hanging every known Nazi war criminal would not do that. Reversion to a strict *lex talionis* in cases of genocide, if one interprets that requirement as a strict “tit for tat,” would be hideous; implicating victims and perpetrating precisely the sorts of deeds that caused them so much suffering. Ironically then, “knowing-forgetting” as one feature of a form of political forgiveness may be most apt, not only philosophically but politically, where truly horrific abuses are concerned. Thus Arendt knew that young Germans, infants in the Hitler years or born subsequently, could not be held directly accountable for what had occurred before their lifetime. But they were obliged to remember, in order that they could be freed to act in other ways. This then is “knowing-forgetting.” Recollection of the past, yes, but not being so wholly defined by it that one’s only option is either to be a victim or an executioner, in Albert Camus’s memorable phrase, rather than an accountable human agent.

There is a very sober passage in Michael Ignatieff's book, *Blood and Belonging: A Journey through the New Nationalism*. Ignatieff went to some of the spots on this earth where terrible suffering is occurring or has recently occurred: Ruanda, Bosnia, and so on, or places that are in upheaval of some kind or another. And as a part of his travels he paid a visit to the old East Germany and talked to some kids reared in East Germany, young men who were skinheads. One of the things he found was that they are angry. They feel as if they don't have a future. They scarcely know the meaning of the insignia that they proudly display. And Ignatieff concludes that they don't understand why they're the only young people in Europe who can't take any pride in the country of which they are a member. There was something about the self-lacerating nature of German identity that was nowadays having precisely the opposite effect of what it was supposed to have. It was making them angry and making them want to sort of flaunt some of the insignia of the horror rather than to see themselves simply in and through the condemnations of that horror that others had imposed on them. It is a very distressing chapter in his book.

Here are a few recent concrete political examples of the dynamic I have in mind. They take place in the most difficult of all arenas for the dynamic of forgiveness and "knowing-forgetting" to play out, namely, the realm of relations between peoples and states. But if forgiveness is to have any real political weightiness as one feature of what it means to try to attain both justice and decent order and peace, then it has to be tested in a number of different arenas.

My first example is drawn from the bloody ground of Northern Ireland and its centuries old troubled relationship with Great Britain. I first wrote up this example before the peace accord, so in effect the story I am going to tell you is the story of how mutual acts of forgiveness, proffered and accepted between Catholics and Protestants, helped to press that peace accord. That peace accord conducted on the diplomatic level would have been unthinkable without this prior work having gone on for years and years.

Now as everyone surely knows, Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland have long been condemned to second class citizenship in what they perceive to be part of their land. But Irish Catholics who are relatively powerless in the overall balance of what political strategists call strategic forces, have also been tormentors, as the history of IRA terrorism and death dealing attests. So it is very significant that one clear feature

prefacing the peace accord voted on in 1998 was a mutual proffering of forgiveness, sparked by a number of leading prelates from the Irish Catholic community, most notably Cardinal Daly of Armagh. On January 22, 1995, he publically asked forgiveness from the people of Britain in a homily delivered in Canterbury; in the cathedral which is the home, as all of you surely know, of the head primate of the Church of England, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Cardinal Daly's words on that occasion are worth pondering, especially with an eye to the vision of a horizon of justice and decent reciprocity that I think you see imbedded. So let me read you from Cardinal Daly's homily:

We Irish are sometimes said to be obsessively concerned with memories of the past. It is salutary, however, to recall that the faults we attribute to others can be a projection of faults within ourselves which we have not had the courage to confront.... What is certainly true is that we all need a healing of memories....Healing of memories demands recognition of our own need for forgiveness, it requires repentance. The original biblical term for repentance, *metanoia*, is a strong word, indicating the need for radical conversion, change of attitude, change of outlook, change of stance; and all this is costing and can be very painful. The old world word "contrition" expresses it well.... This healing, this conversion, this reciprocal giving and accepting of forgiveness are essential elements in the healing of relationships between our two islands and between our divided communities in Northern Ireland.... On this occasion I wish to ask forgiveness from the people of this land for the wrongs and hurts inflicted by the Irish people upon the people of this country on many occasions during our shared history, and particularly in the past 25 years. I believe that this reciprocal recognition of the need to forgive and to be forgiven is a necessary condition for proper Christian, and human, and indeed political relationships between our two islands in the future.¹

The Cardinal continued with words about starting something new,

not sliding back into violence, and so on. What he was saying and doing, Daly added, was avowedly political in the sense of drawing out of the Gospel conclusions which are relevant to our daily living as individuals and as a society. And then reciprocal forgiveness and reconciliation were also offered by the Anglican Primate of Ireland as well as the Archbishop of Canterbury himself.

So, this leads to a question. Is this form of forgiveness, to the extent that it is accessible and enactable, available only to communicants of the Christian faith? The Cardinal suggests not, when he addresses human and political relationships more generally. Now for some, including my colleagues in international relations and security studies and so on, who march under the banner of “realpolitik,” this is a hopelessly idealist stance, out of touch with tough reality. But a response would surely be that it is precisely tough realities that invite this stance. That suggests to one it is a necessary part of a process, not as an alternative to negotiation, diplomacy, and arbitration, but as part of that process of healing, of what it means to start something new. This moves us away from strictly retributive notions of justice to more hopeful possibilities.

Let me give you a second example of a delicate balancing act involving “knowing-forgetting,” or a relinquishment of the full burden of the past in order to sketch an altered horizon of expectations for the future. Here I am going to talk about Pope John Paul II’s visit to the Baltic states in September of 1993. The situation in Lithuania at that point was particularly delicate for John Paul because ardent Polish nationalists within Lithuania had been at work stirring up memories of past mistreatment, or alleged mistreatment, of the Polish minority in Lithuania. There were about 300,000 members of the Polish minority community in Lithuania. Thus the Pope had to be careful not to offend Lithuanian sensibilities, he being not only primate of the Roman Catholic Church but a Pole associated with Polish aspirations to self-determination. It is worth remembering, that much of current Lithuania was once a part of Poland and that the Lithuanian capital Vilnius is Poland’s Wilno, which is dear to the heart of Poles everywhere because it is the birthplace and home of Adam Mickiewicz, who is the greatest Polish poet. John Paul, while acknowledging the love Poles have for this place, used the Lithuanian name Vilnius, not the Polish name Wilno, throughout his pastoral visit, including the only time he spoke Polish, when he delivered mass in the main Polish language church in Vilnius. For the rest of his visit the Pope spoke Lithuanian, which he had learned

for the occasion. This made a tremendously positive impression on the Lithuanians. The Polish citizens of Lithuania were not so pleased, but coming from the Pope they pretty much had to accept it. There are some advantages to the Petrine office. The Pope exhorted the Poles to identify fully with the new democratic Lithuania, not to dwell on the past, by which he meant not to endlessly recall some romantic revisionist idea about making Lithuania a part of Poland again. So I think this account shows the ways in which ethical space, stripped of chauvinistic aspirations, can be created or expanded, making possible a more capacious form of identification. It is in effect, a call to cease rubbing salt in one's own collective wounds.

Now here is a second story. When the Germans annexed the Sudatenland under Nazi auspices or pressure they sent the Jewish population into exile. Then next, once that situation had been reversed, the Czech's eliminated the Germans. Edvard Benes, who was the pre-communist postwar president of Czechoslovakia (that as you know didn't last very long), decreed or approved the expulsion of all Germans from the Sudatenland in 1945. At Potsdam the Allies approved of this action. And as the Germans fled toward Bavaria, the Czechs took revenge. You can imagine the frame of mind they were in. At least 40,000 German men, women, and children were murdered. This episode was long buried in what my Czech friends call the communist deep freeze, where all sorts of issues could not be talked about. But since 1989 and the coming of democracy, the expulsion has become a national issue because the Czechs know that not every Sudaten German was guilty of Hitler's crimes. Oscar Schindler of Schindler's list was a Sudaten German, for example. Now although president Vaclav Havel condemned the expulsion, there were others who wanted to keep the episode closed. And in the meantime Jewish and German victims of the expulsion began seeking the return of their family homes on a case by case basis.

So here is the policy the Czechs came up with. They agreed to permit Jewish families with claims to regain their houses but German families with claims could not. These are families that wanted to return to old villages that had been long since dormant, I mean just vacant, because this was a kind of small-scale ethnic cleansing. Now the German descendants do not understand why their troubles count for nothing. For them a primordial feature of justice was violated and has yet to be put right. And one is quoted as saying, "My only crime was that for 800 years my ancestors lived in this place." So what the German

defendants want, who have an organization in Bavaria, is repeal of the 1945 expulsion decree, and many also say they want to return to villages long emptied or ethnically cleansed of their kind. But this isn't going to happen. It isn't clear that it should happen.

Why is that? Because recognition of a wrong, which Havel has done, does not carry along with it a clear-cut remedy. Recognition does not mean that old wrongs can at present be fully righted to any significant extent if what is sought is compensatory justice, or a restoration of the status quo ante. Perhaps there is nothing left for the expropriated people of German descent to do but to go on with their lives, knowing that what happened to them has at last been recognized. For President Havel admitted they had suffered a great injustice. Now under such circumstances when retributive justice is entirely out of place, and compensatory justice (restoring lands or making reparations) is prudentially impossible and ethically quite murky given the entire story of World War II, acceptance of the gesture of recognition Havel proffered initially, becomes in a sense a form of forgiveness. It makes possible other instances of recognition and soul-searching as time goes on. This is very hard to take if you are aggrieved. But it may be the only way to forestall quaffing the bitter brew of injustice suffered and recompense sought even unto future generations. So Havel's gesture seems to me right. Czechs, although we were victims, overwhelmingly also knew sin. We are not blameless.

There is a follow-up to this initial story. In this follow-up what happened is that at the highest diplomatic levels, Germany agreed to apologize for its invasion of the former Czechoslovakia. The Czechs in turn agreed to express regret for the postwar expulsion of millions of Sudeten Germans. The Germans apologized for Nazi policies of violence, the Czechs expressed regret that their expulsions caused suffering and injustice to innocent people. Again, things are not going to be put entirely right in the eyes of many who have claims. But there is at least a mutual gesture from which future relations can be built. Some sort of elemental humanitarian principles have been recognized, even when full reparations and compensation are not in the cards. But acknowledgment and recognition of injustice are possible and forthcoming, it seems to me, in this case and in many others, as a minimal expectation, whereby a rudimentary requirement of justice becomes a feature of this larger pattern of political forgiveness. So maybe what this tells us is that there is a political version of forgiveness that often has to step back

from the expectation of full reconciliation and a kind of absolution. As hard as it is for us to accept, it seems to me that there are no sacraments and no blessings and no benedictions in politics.

Thinking politically, one might ask what sorts of deeds warrant the solemn drama of forgiveness of a sort related to, yet are different in some fundamental ways, from acts that we usually think of when we think of a redemption narrative. I am going now to take up one of the most dramatic cases, and it is with this case I am going to close. The case I am referring to is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. But let me before I move to that, say just a couple of other words to remind you of where we are. Nothing I have thus far said should be taken as a permit to refrain from action where action is possible to prevent an egregious collective wrong from being committed. In daily life with those we love the process of forgiveness is an enactment that is part of the very daily-ness of our existence. It makes the quotidian liveable. But in the affairs of what used to be called, when I was studying, "men and states," these enactments are not and can not be so ordinary and so direct. However, that does not forestall "knowing-forgetting" with its complex interplay of justice and forgiveness altogether. With official recognition of mutual wrongs, or some form of reparations (perhaps state level apologies), the scales are somewhat righted. And it seems to me a quest for such fragile achievements within our imperfect earthly state is what the politics of forgiveness is all about. Now let's go to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission which just finished its work, as you know, and presented it to President Nelson Mandela.

Created by an act of the post-apartheid democratic parliament in 1995, the objectives of the Commission were nothing less than to set in motion and secure a new political culture in South Africa. The work of the Commission was divided into three distinct but related parts. First, it focussed on a full accounting of gross violations of human rights (a gross violation was defined as "the killing, abduction, torture, or severe ill treatment of any person, or any attempt, conspiracy, incitement, instigation, command, or procurement to commit an act referred to in part and which emanated from conflicts of the past by any person acting as a political motive"). That was the definition. Second, it focussed on a consideration of amnesty appeals. And third, it focussed on possible reparative measures.

Nearly all of these activities took place in full view of the public.

During a trip to South Africa (it was my second trip there, but it is the one that counts as far as this discussion is concerned) in August of 1997, I met with the research office of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Capetown, and spent a good bit of time with its director, professor Charles Villa-Vicencio, who is a theologian. What I learned departed rather markedly from much of what I assumed about the TRC, given the press reports in the United States. For example, the TRC does not require that a perpetrator openly repent or apologize, although most, if not all do this. Such manifestation of regret is a consideration for any amnesty request. Now they also have to make an assessment of the sincerity of this act, because the expectation that a perpetrator will make some public apology ran pretty high. And this led to the terrible sort of spectacle of Winnie Mandela's appearance, why it was so painful. Archbishop Tutu was really begging her to acknowledge her securely documented role in torture and murder. In the absence of such acknowledgment on her part, Tutu nonetheless went on to beg the families of her victims to embrace her in the name of reconciliation. This left a bad taste in many mouths because it didn't seem as if there was real reciprocity there. The victims were supposed to forgive someone who hadn't acknowledged that she had done what they were supposed to forgive her for. So there were those kind of instances. They were rare. Minimally, however, what was demanded was that full disclosure of politically motivated crimes had to be proffered. The emphasis was on the victims, for the Commission recognized just how important a true recounting of the basic facts are to those who have suffered wrongs. I cannot stress how important that is to those who have suffered wrong under the cover of darkness or in the full light of day under state sponsorship. So to know what happened, when, where, how, is terribly important to people who have suffered. I have been struck by this basic fact over and over again. I remember especially my interviews with Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina, and some interviews I did with Palestinian mothers who lost children during the infanticide. Not to know is a horrible thing. And of course only the perpetrators have access to certain facts, as most often there are no innocent eyewitnesses to dirty deed-doing if the victims themselves do not live to tell the tale. So the TRC was given a specific task of getting as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes, and extent of gross human rights violations from the years 1960 to 1993. And as a corollary or in a sense an outgrowth of that, they had the task

of restoring the human and civil dignity of victims by giving them an opportunity to relate their accounts of the violations of which they were victims, of facilitating the granting of amnesty to those giving full disclosure of politically motivated crimes, and of making recommendations to parliament on reparation or rehabilitation measures to be taken, including measures to prevent the commission of human rights violations in the future.

Well, why would a country do this? Why go down this path rather than some other? This is what Charles Vilavencencio said, "It is important that we all treat one another in the best possible manner, that even if we are not fully reconciled to one another, we do not kill one another." "And truth," he insisted (by which he means a form of public cognition, not just the fact that I am walking around with a secret of mine, but a public cognition as a form of recognition) "is central to this very possibility of truth." So it is a dynamic process that has to be public, and can't take the form of private "mea culpas." The fact that people were murdered, maimed, and brutalized for their political views and the colour of their skin must be acknowledged. So disclosure, he argued, is an antidote to any attempt by apartheid revisionists in the future to portray apartheid as a desirable policy that somehow went askew, as not a bad idea but with a few little excesses over here. What they wanted was a record that was so complete and so incontrovertible, a record that in large part was constituted by the defenders and agents of apartheid itself, that it would prevent in future any revisionist politics which would deny the full scope of the horrors of that regime. This was a regime that required and legitimated violence. Violence was not an anomaly, it was the way things were done. Now the purpose of this was not as some mistakenly suggested, just to pat perpetrators on the head and send them on their way. Rather, those who violated human rights in a gross way were being denied the status of martyrs for the old order. The view was that we are not going to maintain most of those folks in prison as a symbol of the past. Instead, what they have to do is to try to re-enter a very new community, a community that has full knowledge of what they did, and when they did it, and where they did it. Again Vilavencencio says, "An authentic historical record of human rights abuses is vital because it serves as a basis for assisting future generations to defend democracy and the rule of law in the face of any future attempt at authoritarian rule."

This is a terribly complex business, which deploys certain theological

steps to political ends and purposes. Acknowledgment, contrition, preparedness to make restitution, the extending and receiving of forgiveness, is a form of on-going reconciliation. So when you talk about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, what I was told over and over again, was that reconciliation is the work of many lifetimes. Truth is the beginning of a long process.

Given this complexity, it is not surprising perhaps that even various astute observers have sometimes gotten it wrong. I'm thinking of Timothy Garton Ash who is the great recorder of the events in central eastern Europe in the 1989 revolution, and who recently turned his attention to South Africa. I think regarding South Africa his good ear suddenly deserted him just a bit. In an essay Ash sees the reconciliation aspect of the TRC as troubling. He calls it a deeply ill-liberal idea. He goes on to say, that liberalism means living with unresolvable conflicts of values and goals, and that South Africa has those in plenty. And then he asks, "Would it not be more realistic to define a more modest goal, such as cooperation and tolerance?" Well, here it seems to me he misunderstands the meaning of reconciliation, which does not imply some harmonizing of interests and beliefs on the political level, nor does it require blurring the edge of political controversies. Instead it means bringing matters into a frame within which conflicts can be adjudicated short of bloodshed. To be sure, to the extent that Archbishop Tutu may urge upon people public acts of personal reconciliation when they may not be prepared for such gestures, as happened a time or two, those particular examples are rather problematic. But overall, the idea is to make possible a future. That is, reconciliation is the work of many lifetimes. So I take reconciliation in this political context to refer to or mean that one no longer begins with a deadly *a priori*, namely, the view that the majority of, or a sizable chunk of one's fellow countrymen and women are enemies rather than one's fellow countrymen and women. It is an attempt to enclose everyone within a single socio-political space, that is framed by an ethical horizon that has been constituted in part by full public recognition of the horrors of the apartheid era.

Still many people included will continue to ask about justice. Where is the justice? And here the South Africans believe they are making a contribution by challenging the most prevalent models of justice that reign among us. What they are aiming for they insist is, and this is a phrase they are using, "political restorative justice." This they see as a form of political forgiveness concerned with justice. This means it is

neither cheap forgiveness nor the dominant western mode of retributive or punitive justice. Restorative justice aims for a future which generates no new victims of the sort that emerge from the systematic misdeeds and criminality that blighted the past. And political restorative justice, they argue, addresses the legitimate concerns of victims and survivors while seeking to reintegrate perpetrators into the community. So here they are trying to put together a kind of creative view of justice. They say they know it is something of a compromise but they don't think it is a sordid compromise. Rather it is believed to be the kind of compromise that makes political life and a political future possible. That is, in a sense (and this is tricky), quite legitimate demands of justice, including certain forms of just punishment for those who perpetrated horrible deeds, are partially foregone in order that they, the perpetrators, might be reinstated in an order grounded in justice rather than in injustice. So ironically, the moral rehabilitation of the political world requires at the outset that certain features of just punishment be evacuated temporarily in the interests of this restorative project. Once again, full reparation, compensation, or just punishment is never possible in the case of large scale horrors. This is a point made to me over and over again, by several members of the Argentine Mothers of the Disappeared, who insisted that they wanted justice, not vengeance. They didn't want torturers to be tortured. They didn't want executioners to be executed. As one of them told me, "That view that we could get everyone who ever tortured anyone, and we could punish them and treat them exactly as they treated others, that was a dark and awful utopianism." And Renee Epelbaum told me, "We are not utopians. We are political realists, who seek justice." So the TRC commissioners are concerned with legitimating a new fragile democratic regime, and having sufficient time to build up a culture of human rights and constitutional guarantees. The way they have done it is not going to satisfy everyone. But I would submit these are the kinds of attempts that ought to draw not just our attention, but our honour and our respect.

Let me conclude. Part of what is involved in restorative justice is a dramatic transformation in the horizon of expectation. As well, punitive measures, when an old and horrible regime falls, may harden political attitudes and keep alive morbid convictions rather than softening them. In other words, mandatory retribution could well undermine the very democratic processes on which the rule of law is based. Now this does not mean, in South Africa and in many other situations, that one takes

leave of punishment entirely. But it does mean that one recognizes one must change the framework of expectation, in order that future punishment can be seen as part of an overall structure of fair justice. That punishment is never an end in itself, so much as a last resort. So a real challenge, and I think it is not one just faced by the South Africans, for anyone who enters into this realm of political/ethical debate, is to determine where and when punishment and even some forms of retribution might fit as part of a decent, restorative, hopeful political project. To say the stakes are high is to dramatically understate the matter. But let me remind you once again, that this idea of “knowing-forgetting” is not an invitation to collective amnesia. But it is a way to try to release all of us from the full weight and burden of the past, in order that we could build a more capacious, more decent, and a more forgiving future. Thanks very much.

Note

- ¹ The text of this address in full can be found under the title “Breakdown of the Cease-Fire,” *Origins* 25, no. 35 (February 22, 1996) 585-588.