

Miroslav Volf

*Challenges of Repentance and Forgiveness*

# Overcoming the Double Exclusion

**G**enuine repentance may be one of the most difficult acts for a person, let alone a community, to perform. For good reasons, Christian tradition thinks of genuine repentance not as a human possibility but as a gift of God. It is not just that we do not like being wrong, but that almost invariably the others are not completely right either. As Carl Gustav Jung observed after World War Two, most confessions come as a mixture of repentance, self-defense, and even some lust for revenge. We admit wrongdoing, justify ourselves, and attack, all in one breath.

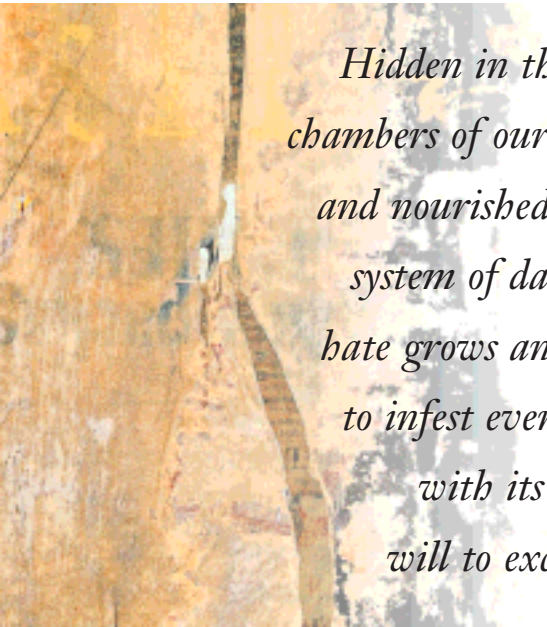
When we are clearly the aggressors, no matter how great our offense—if we only admit it—we will want to point out the noninnocence of the side we have victimized and seek to drag them into the swamp of common undifferentiated sinfulness which requires a balanced reciprocal confession of sin. The difficulty with which the Evangelical Church in Germany made its rather lame confession after World War Two (the so called “Stuttgart Declaration,” adopted on October 18–19, 1945) is a good example. Resistance to repentance will be even greater if we see ourselves as disprivileged and powerless victims. How will we be able to confess our wrongdoing without seeking to justify ourselves by pointing to the wrongdoing we have suffered, a wrongdoing that both dwarfs any wrongdoing that we might have committed and provides a good deal of explanation for why we committed it? Whether we are aggressors or victims, genuine repentance demands that we take ourselves, so to say, out of the mesh of small and big evil deeds that characterize so

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much of our social intercourse, refuse to explain our behavior and accuse others, and simply take our wrongdoing upon ourselves: “I have sinned in my thoughts, in my words, and in my deeds,” as the Book of Common Prayer puts it.

Commenting on the “Stuttgart Declaration,” Jurgen Moltmann points out both the pain and the promise of a genuine confession:

A person who thus admits his guilt and complicity renders himself defenseless,



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chambers of our hearts  
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hate grows and seeks  
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assailable and vulnerable. He stands there, muddled and weighed down. Everyone can point at him and despise him. But he becomes free from alienation and the determination of his actions by others; he comes to himself, and steps into the light of a truth which makes him free.... (Moltmann 1987,43)

Liberation through confession—liberation from “the suppression of guilt, and from an obtuse belief in destiny,” from “the armor of insensibility and defiance in which we had encased ourselves,” as Moltmann describes it (43)—might be among the most painful of all liberations. But when we have made this first difficult step of repentance we have traveled a good distance on the road to reconciliation. The next step is forgiveness.

But is forgiveness any easier? Deep within the heart of every victim, anger swells up against the perpetrator, rage inflamed by unredeemed suffering. The imprecatory Psalms seem to come upon victims’ lips much more easily than the

prayer of Jesus on the cross. If anything, they would rather pray, “Forgive them not, Father, for they knew what they did!” The powerful emotional pull of revenge is not the only reason we resist forgiving, however. Our cool sense of justice sends the same message: the perpetrator deserves unforgiveness; it would be unjust to forgive. As Lewis Smedes puts it in *Forgive and Forget*, forgiveness is an outrage “against straight-line dues-paying morality.” If perpetrators were repentant, forgiveness would come more easily. But

too often they are not. And so both victim and perpetrator are imprisoned in the automatism of mutual exclusion, unable to forgive or repent and united in a perverse communion of mutual hate.

Instead of wanting to forgive, we instinctively seek revenge. An evil deed will not be owed for long; it demands instant repayment in kind. The trouble with revenge, however, is that it enslaves us. As Hannah Arendt pointed out in *The Human Condition*, vengeance acts in the form of reacting against an original trespassing, whereby far from putting an end to the consequences of the first misdeed, everybody

remains bound to the process, permitting the chain reaction contained in every action to take its unhindered course;

... [vengeance] encloses both doer and sufferer in the relentless automatism of the action process, which by itself need never come to an end. (Arendt 1959, 216)

The endless turning of the spiral of vengeance...has its own good reasons that seem woven into the very fabric of social realities. The one reason has to do with a lack of sync between the perspectives of social actors. When one party sees itself as simply seeking justice or even settling for less than justice, the other may perceive the same action as taking revenge or perpetrating injustice. As the intended justice is translated by the other party into actual injustice, a “just” revenge leads to a “just” counter-revenge. We may call this first reason for the spiral of vengeance “the predicament of partiality”—the inability of the parties locked in conflict to agree

on the moral significance of their actions.

The other reason for the spiral of vengeance lies in the temporal sequence in which our acts are necessarily embedded. Hannah Arendt has called it “the predicament of irreversibility”—an inability “to undo what one has done though one did not, or could not, have known what he was doing” (Arendt 1959, 212f.). If our deeds and their consequences could be undone, revenge would not be necessary. The undoing, if there were a will for it, would suffice. But our actions are irreversible. Even God cannot alter them. And so the urge for vengeance seems irrepressible. The only way out of the predicament of irreversibility, Arendt insisted, is through forgiveness. Forgiveness is also the only way out of the predicament of partiality, I would add. A genuinely free act which “does not merely re-act” (216), forgiveness breaks the power of the remembered past and transcends the claims of the affirmed justice and so makes the spiral of vengeance grind to a halt. This is the social import of forgiveness.

“The discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth,” claimed Hannah Arendt (214f.). Appropriate or not, the title of “discoverer” correctly underlines the centrality of forgiveness in Jesus’ proclamation. The climate of pervasive oppression in which he preached was suffused with the desire for revenge. The principle “If anyone hits you, hit back! If anyone takes your coat, burn down his house!” seemed the only way to survive (Theissen 1987, 88); Lamech’s kind of revenge, which returns seventy seven blows for every one received, seemed, paradoxically, the only way to root out injustice (Genesis 4:23–24). Turning Lamech’s logic on its head, however, Jesus demanded his followers not simply to forego revenge, but to forgive as many times as Lamech sought to avenge himself (Matthew 18:21). **The injustice of oppression must be fought with the creative “injustice” of forgiveness, not with the aping injustice of revenge.**

How do we find the strength to forgive, however? Should we try to persuade ourselves that forgiveness is invariably good for mental and spiritual health whereas vindictiveness is bad? Should we tell ourselves that, given the nature of our world, it is wiser to forgive than to fall prey to the spinning spiral of revenge? Even if valid, will these arguments get at such a power-

ful emotion as the desire for revenge? More significantly, do they take sufficient note of the fact that the desire for revenge, far from being just an irrational passion of a sick or maladjusted psyche, flows “from a need to restore ‘something missing’—a sense of physical and emotional integrity that is shattered by violence,” as Susan Jacoby rightly argued in *Wild Justice*? How will we satisfy our thirst for justice and calm our passion for revenge so as to practice forgiveness?

In the imprecatory Psalms, torrents of rage have been allowed to flow freely, channeled only by the robust structure of a ritual prayer (Barth 1966, 43ff.). Strangely enough, they may point to a way out of slavery to revenge and into the freedom of forgiveness. This suggestion will not work, of course, if we see the imprecatory Psalms as publicly pronounced indirect threats to powerful enemies who could not be confronted directly—moments “in a larger web of intriguing words and actions in which the Psalmist is fully involved,” as Gerald T Shepard has argued in an essay in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis* (74). Partly out of a false concern that these Psalms may “dissipate and neutralize the desire actually to retaliate, to punish, or to take power from another person” (71), Sheppard misreads the specific character of the Psalms as discourse. They are prayers. And everybody except moderns for whom God does not matter knows that the primary addressee of prayers is God. Whatever else these Psalms might have done to those who listened (and I do not doubt that they functioned at that level too), they brought the puzzlement and rage of the oppressed over injustice into the presence of the God of justice who is the God of the oppressed (Miller 1994, 106ff.).

For the followers of the crucified Messiah, the main message of the imprecatory Psalms is this: rage belongs before God—not in the reflectively managed and manicured form of a confession, but as a pre-reflective outburst from the depths of the soul. This is no mere cathartic discharge of pent up aggression before the Almighty who ought to care. Much more significantly, by placing unattended rage before God we place both our unjust enemy and our own vengeful self face to face with a God who loves and does justice. Hidden in the dark chambers of our hearts and nourished by the system of darkness, hate grows and seeks to infest

everything with its hellish will to exclusion. **In the light of the justice and love of God, however, hate recedes and the seed is planted for the miracle of forgiveness.** Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners. But no one can be in the presence of the God of the crucified Messiah for long without overcoming this double exclusion—without transposing the enemy from the sphere of monstrous inhumanity into the sphere of shared humanity and herself from the sphere of proud innocence into the sphere of common sinfulness. When one knows that the torturer will not eternally triumph over the victim one is free to rediscover that person’s humanity and imitate God’s love for him. And when one knows that God’s love is greater than all sin, one is free to see oneself in the light of God’s justice and so rediscover one’s own sinfulness.

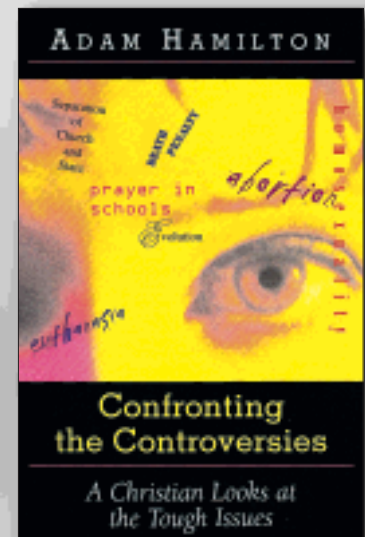
In the presence of God our rage over injustice may give way to forgiveness, which in turn will make the search for justice for all possible. If forgiveness does take place it will be but an echo of the forgiveness granted by the just and loving God—the only forgiveness that ultimately matters, because, though we must forgive, in a very real sense no one can either forgive or retain sins “but God alone” (Mark 2:7). □

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