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The Abuse of Forgiveness in Dealing with Legacies of Violence

Urszula Pękala

Abstract

In my paper I explore the abuse of forgiveness in the context of coming to terms with past violence in social and international relationships. The risk of abuse in this context is determined by several factors, such as political interests and the national or religious identities of participating groups, particularly their self-images as victims or perpetrators, which are constructed in relation to memories of past conflicts. The abuse of forgiveness takes different forms and concerns both parties – the one seeking forgiveness and the one granting it. Generally speaking, forgiveness is abused when it is used more to gain an advantage than to restore a damaged relationship. Understanding the abuse of forgiveness depends on how forgiveness is defined. In my paper I make use of the Christian theological notion of forgiveness because, firstly, it has often been transferred into political contexts from the religious sphere and, secondly, social and political forgiveness has often involved the participation of religious organizations as well as religiously-motivated individuals. Overall, on the basis of an examination of post-war Polish-German relations, this paper focuses on the question: why and how do processes of memory and identity formation lead to such abuses?

Key Words: abuse of forgiveness, Christian understanding of forgiveness, identity, memory, Polish-German relations, Second World War.

1. Introduction

Granting or seeking forgiveness is burdened by the risk of its abuse, both in relationships among individuals and groups. In this paper I explore the abuse of forgiveness in the context of coming to terms with past violence in international relationships, referring specifically to the German-Polish relations after the Second World War.

The risk of abuse in this context is determined by several factors. I focus on two of them – identities of participating groups and memories of past conflict – asking the question: why and how do processes of memory and identity formation lead to the abuse of forgiveness?

2. The Christian Understanding of Forgiveness

Understanding the abuse of forgiveness depends on how forgiveness is defined. Forgiveness has been extensively analysed in theology and philosophy with various and sometimes conflicting results, ranging from the postulate of unconditional forgiveness, which excludes even the necessity of repentance (e.g.

Derrida), to the impossibility of forgiveness (e.g. Jankélévitch). In my paper I refer to the Christian theological understanding of forgiveness because, firstly, it has often been transferred into political contexts from the religious sphere in order to deal with the violent past, and, secondly, Christian organizations and individuals have played a significant role in German-Polish reconciliation efforts.

Christian forgiveness unfolds in two dimensions: vertically, between God and humankind, and horizontally, among human beings. God's forgiveness – both in earthly and eschatological terms – makes forgiveness among human beings possible; it opens up to human beings a path to conversion and reconciliation with one another in a new, transformed existence; it opens a new perspective on the future. God's forgiveness is rooted in his unconditional love. Christians are called to forgive as God forgives – freely and selflessly. Forgiveness cannot be extorted.

In the Christian view, repentance is a necessary condition for forgiveness. Forgiveness sets free both parties – the forgiver and the forgiven – from the burden of the past and restores their damaged relationship. If there is no repentance, a restoration of a damaged relationship is impossible because the perpetrator still has the attitude that caused the harm in the first place.¹ Repentance makes possible not only a transformation in the attitude of the perpetrator but also a new relationship between the repentant perpetrator and the wronged party. Nobody is obliged to forgive when the offender does not repent. In this context it is important to distinguish between a willingness to forgive and forgiveness itself. 'With regard to human inter-relationships, if we are to be formulaic about it, we might say that, in the human case, as a disposition of the heart, forgiveness precedes repentance and, as a completed action, it awaits it.'²

I consider forgiveness to be necessary for reconciliation. In the context of German-Polish relations both are closely connected. Some authors argue that forgiveness does not belong necessarily to the process of reconciliation; some consider reconciliation to be an alternative to forgiveness.³ In my own view, without forgiveness there cannot be reconciliation but only a kind of armistice – a temporary state founded not on confrontation with the past but only on an agreement of both parties to cease with violence and try to live as if no harm had been done.

3. Forms of Abuse of Forgiveness

The abuse of forgiveness takes different forms and involves two parties – the one seeking forgiveness and the one offering it.

3.1. Abuse in Seeking Forgiveness

I distinguish between three forms of abuse by the party seeking forgiveness. First, abuse occurs when forgiveness is not requested but extorted: the offender and/or a third party prescribe to the victim how best to deal with the harm experienced; they claim the victim is obliged to grant forgiveness as this is understood to be the best way of dealing with the past. The offending party ignores the fact that forgiveness can be only offered freely and on the basis of mutual

respect. Besides, in this situation it is doubtful whether the offender does authentically repent.

These are very sensitive issues in German-Polish relations. According to the Nazi ideology Poles were 'subhuman' (Untermenschen), destined to serve the German 'master race'. Even though, today, German society widely condemns this ideology, attitudes of haughtiness toward Poles still persist in subtle ways – also in the context of reconciliation. Germany's reconciliation with Poland is sometimes presented as an achievement primarily of Federal Republic and not, more symmetrically, of Germany and Poland together.

The second form of abuse is connected to the first. Calls for forgiveness in political discourse can be used to denounce a particular group as unwilling to grant it, in order to discredit that group politically or socially. The victim is accused of being in some sense an offender – because he/she refuses reconciliation and does not want to liberate the perpetrator from the burden of the past. In this way, the offending party may seek to downplay or conceal uncomfortable facts or to distribute the blame for the damaged relationship between the two parties, thereby relativizing their own offences. As in the first form of abuse, there is a problem of lacking repentance.

Currently this form of abuse of forgiveness is not so present in German-Polish relations but in the period of Kaczyński's government in Poland (2005-2007) the German media frequently depicted Poles as exclusively responsible for tensions between the two countries (as if war pursued by Nazi-Germany was not the main root cause of these tensions). To be sure, the Polish government's mode of communication on the topic of the Second World War was not a very diplomatic one. At the same time, an alternate historical discourse regarding the war, advanced especially by Erika Steinbach and 'Bund der Vertriebenen', an organization of expellees from the German territory which in 1945 became Polish, was fairly popular in the German media. This discourse – because of its unilateralism, its tendency to overlook the whole international context surrounding the Polish border dispute, and the brutality of Nazi-German terror in Poland – explains partially the hard-line stance of the Polish government at the time.

The problem of public historical discourse is connected to the third form of abuse of forgiveness: forgiveness can be identified with forgetting the past or used to suppress some aspects of the past which are uncomfortable for the present. But is it possible to progress into the future if the past is forgotten? I reflect on this issue below.

In 2007, the current president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, accused Poles of stirring the demons of the past in order to destroy the idea of Europe.⁴ He was not alone. In the public debate of 2005-2007, substantive Polish reasons for criticizing German historical discourse were rarely presented in the German media but a stereotypical Polish attitude of anti-German resentment was stressed.

Forgetting is a new harm because the victims, when forgotten and left alone with their suffering, become victims for the second time. In Germany, this issue is

connected to an attempt to make a victims' hierarchy.⁵ Victims are divided between those who deserve more or less attention and remembering, depending, for example, on the number of the dead or the way they were murdered. In that context, in Germany and in Western Europe generally, the Shoah is sometimes mentioned as a crime more worthy of remembrance than Nazi crimes on Slavs, even though they have a common root – racial ideology; or the victims of Nazi crimes are remembered but the victims of communism are not, even though there were millions of people murdered by communist regimes in several countries. Making such hierarchy is an abuse of memory of all victims – the Jewish and Slavic victims of Nazis as well as the victims of communism.

3.2. Abuse in Granting Forgiveness

The party granting forgiveness can also abuse it. I consider two forms of such abuse. First, a party who offers forgiveness claims to speak for all, but this party may not have been given a mandate to do so. This is an inevitable problem of forgiveness in the context of relationships between nations or other groups. In 1965, the Catholic bishops of Poland addressed the German bishops with a reconciliation letter concerning the Second World War which included the phrase 'We forgive and ask forgiveness'. Many Poles were psychologically unready to follow this gesture toward Germans; many saw it to be an offence toward their mourning or individual dealing with the past. They asked whether the bishops had a right to forgive in the name of the Polish nation; after all, forgiveness can only be granted by individuals. Nevertheless the letter should not be characterized unambiguously as an abuse. Today the letter formulated by bishops in the name of the Polish nation is acknowledged as a milestone in German-Polish reconciliation.

Another form of abusing forgiveness when granting it is an attempt to cling to one's role as a victim and to keep the offender in a dependent position. The victim is the one who decides whether he/she forgives and always holds out a possibility of denying forgiveness. Therefore, in some sense, forgiveness implies a dependence of the party seeking forgiveness on the one granting it. The victim can use the act of granting forgiveness to assert his/her own moral superiority. In such situations a restoration and further development of the relationship is disturbed. It has to be asked whether Kaczyński's government did not, to some extent, act in this way when referring to Polish losses during the Second World War in discussions of contemporary political issues.

4. Identity, Memory, and Forgiveness

In the forms of abuse of forgiveness mentioned above, identity and memory play an important role. They are explicitly or implicitly present in the motivations and actions of both parties. Why and how do processes of memory and identity formation lead to such abuses?

Every offence changes in some sense the identity of the involved parties: it turns them into oppressor and victim. They are objectively in a new situation as a result of the offence – a situation characterized by irreversible physical and

psychological consequences. At the same time, the offence arises from a particular definition of the self and a definition of the other: the offence happens because one party feels justified in offending the other.

Forgiveness has an impact on the identity of both parties as well. As a consequence of the offence the victim is put in a position of dependence on the perpetrator who influenced his/her life by committing the offence. The victim had not been given the possibility of deciding whether or not to be offended against, but afterwards he/she nonetheless has to live with the consequences of the offence. When forgiving, the victim becomes the one who, to a significant extent, determines the relationship's further development. Throughout the act of forgiveness he/she can liberate himself/herself from the position of dependence on the perpetrator; he/she can assert a refusal to be further defined as a victim of a particular offence, even if the harm and its consequences cannot be erased. On the other hand, in the act of forgiveness the victim defines the offender in a new way: as a morally acting person.

The offender undergoes, too, the process of identity transformation if he/she repents and asks forgiveness. Even though not explicitly realized as such, the problem of repentance is a problem of identity. Repentance and pleas for forgiveness mean that the offender recognizes his/her action as immoral. It implies a change in the way the offender defines himself/herself. This process requires a questioning of, or even a negation of, the system of values in which his/her actions were founded up to now. On the other hand, repentance and forgiveness require from the offender a redefinition of the offended party and a rethinking of the relationship damaged by the offence. When committing the offence, the offender claimed to have had a right to decide on the destiny of the victim; he/she saw himself/herself in a position of superiority. Now the offender has to renounce the predominant position claimed earlier; he/she has to give up dominance over the victim, who decides whether or not to forgive.

This is the point where the problem of identity increases the risk of abuse of forgiveness. Changes in one's identity can be frightening and sometimes destructive; they may cause defensive reactions or a retreat into stereotypes and prejudices, so that one can be unable to forgive or seek forgiveness. It is also possible that, rather than one's identity being changed by forgiveness, forgiveness may merely be used to reinforce the existing identity.

I think that we can observe this problem in the German-Polish reconciliation process. In the case of the German occupation of Poland the offence was founded upon a particular ideology justifying the dominant position of the offender. By contrast, the reconciliation between Germany and France proceeded more quickly and easily than between Germany and Poland. The French may have been the Germans' arch-enemies (*Erbfeinde*) but they were still regarded as equals; the Poles, in contrast, were despised as Slavic '*Untermenschen*'. Because the attitude of subtle superiority towards the Poles is still present in parts of German society, the reconciliation process is much more difficult than in the case of France.

Seeking forgiveness from an opponent one regards as an equal is easier than seeking it from one who is or was despised.

Also, memory can lead to abuse of forgiveness. Memory is not a state – it is a moving, communicative process.⁶ Therefore, memory can manipulate or falsely represent history. Forgiveness grounded on a misrepresented history is an abuse. Another problem is forgetting the past. There is no authentic forgiveness without remembering. Past offences are forgiven not in order to live *as if they did not happen* but actually *because* they happened. Thanks to forgiveness, the involved parties can live with the violent past not as if nothing happened, but *even though* it happened, and is irreversible. Therefore, forgiveness enables a new beginning based neither on forgetting nor on revenge; it makes it possible to look fearlessly on the past without burying facts that could have a negative impact on the present; it does not erase the past but helps to cope with its inevitable consequences. To forget is only an apparent solution and actually signifies a paradoxical captivity to the past. As the memory of the un-forgiven past is unbearable, the one who lives in fear of the past seeks to escape it. However, anyone who needs to escape cannot be said to be genuinely free.

Forgetting does not necessarily mean an active denial of facts about the past. It can simply mean their absence from memory. For forgiveness and reconciliation, this is an important problem: the party who remembers and talks about crimes which are not present in the collective memory risks being accused of opposition to forgiveness. The latter is seen in the German-Polish relationship. Most Germans are not aware of the extent of Nazi terror towards the Polish population. In the German public, to this day, most people associate the victims of the Second World War with Jews, German dead in Allies' bombardments, and German expellees; other victims are almost absent. Forgetting about Polish victims has several causes, for example, little interest in a neighbouring country resulting in lack of knowledge about it. On the other hand, the Poles actually do not remember the German victims of Allies' bombardments or German women raped by Red Army soldiers. When Germans do not know how terrible Polish war experiences were, they assume that Poles are over-sensitive, that they cultivate excessive anti-German resentment. In reaction to that, Poles assume that Germans deny atrocities committed by Nazi-Germany and pose primarily as war victims forgetting their role as oppressors. Neither party is aware of what the other party really knows and keeps (whether voluntarily or involuntarily) in their memory.

Identity and memory are risk factors for the abuse of forgiveness in political contexts. But does the risk that forgiveness will be abused increase when it is transferred from its original religious context into politics? I see multiple answers to this question. On the one hand – it does. The vertical dimension of forgiveness (humanity's relationship to God, in eschatological terms) gets lost in political discourse and consequently so does an important framework of references and conditions that are – from a Christian theological point of view – necessary for authentic forgiveness. It opens up space for abuse. On the other hand – paradoxically, it does not. Christians are not secured against failures and abuse

even though they theoretically know the religious ideal of forgiveness. The abuse of forgiveness in the process of German-Polish reconciliation occurs even among identifying Christians.

5. Final Remarks

Every form of abuse misapprehends the nature of forgiveness and fails its purpose, which is to restore damaged relationships and progress into the future. Forgiveness is a turning point between the past and the future. It demands significant preparation by both the offender and the offended, and it influences their subsequent lives. This temporal dimension of forgiveness is connected with memory and identity. Being aware of their significance to forgiveness might not completely eliminate the risk of abuse, but it helps us at least to understand the mechanism through which the abuse works.

Notes

- ¹ Karin Scheiber, *Vergebung: Eine systematisch-theologische Untersuchung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 257, 260.
- ² S. N. Williams, 'What Christians Believe about Forgiveness', *Studies in Christian Ethics (Studies in Christian Ethics)* 24 2 (2011): 153.
- ³ Scheiber, *Vergebung*, 270-272; Karolina Wigura, *Wina narodów: Przebaczenie jako strategia prowadzenia polityki* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2011), 139-140; Elisabeth Seidler, 'Versöhnung: Prolegomena einer künftigen Soteriologie', *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 42 (1995), 9, 5-48.
- ⁴ ARD Tagesschau. 'Tagesschau.' Material video accessed June 27, 2007. <http://www.tagesschau.de/multimedia/sendung.html>.
- ⁵ Józefa Hannelowa, 'Die Zeit ist reif für einen neuen Brief der Bischöfe', in *"Wir vergeben und bitten um Vergebung": Der Briefwechsel der polnischen und deutschen Bischöfe von 1965 und seine Wirkung*, ed. Basil Kerski, Thomas Kycia and Robert Żurek (Osnabrück: Fibre, 2006), 200; Basil Kerski and Zdzisław Owczarek, ed., *Ist gemeinsame Erinnerung möglich? : Polen und Deutschland 60 Jahre nach der Potsdamer Konferenz = Czy możliwa jest wspólna pamięć? : Polska i Niemcy 60 lat po konferencji poczdamskiej* (Berlin: Polnisches Institut Berlin, 2005), 61-62, 72.
- ⁶ Kerski and Owczarek, *Ist gemeinsame Erinnerung möglich*, 73.

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