

Room for forgiveness?

A theological perspective

by Frits de Lange

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By way of introduction I want to quote a rather unusual letter to the editor in a newspaper of early February, last year:

'Forgiveness becomes more and more difficult for me, and not only the word (what does it really mean, forgiveness?), but especially the deed (how do you do that, forgive someone?). Is forgiveness the same as being able to understand what someone did (wrong)? Is forgiveness excusing someone? Is forgiveness not taking things too seriously? Is forgiveness continuing as if nothing happened? Is forgiveness giving someone a chance to go on living in spite of what happened?

In the Lord's Prayer forgiveness is asked for. Is that a condition – that it is asked for? Do you have to forgive someone who does not ask for it? Do you – the one who forgives – have to take the initiative, or the person on the other side? Do you have to forgive, whatever the cost? According to me, we are not obliged to do anything. Can one forgive? I don't know. Who will tell me that I must forgive the man who murdered my daughter in February last year? He does not tell me himself, does not even ask for it. Can I forgive him? I would not know how, without insulting my daughter' (*Trouw*, February 1998).

It turns out that the author of this letter is the father of a 24-year-old daughter whom he found in her apartment exactly a year before that, with a slit throat, the victim of a vulgar robbery with murder. With his unusual letter he wanted to respond to a cheap appeal to forgiveness, which someone else had made in another letter to the editor, because a church choir had refused to perform together with a famous opera singer, who shortly before that had run over and killed a woman, while he was under the influence of alcohol. This latter writer had pointed to the Christian idea of reconciliation: 'Isn't Christmas the feast of forgiveness and reconciliation?'

Forgiveness – it is a difficult concept, but it is easily spoken of, especially by Christians. It seems that in contemporary general

ethics one does not want to say very much about it. In the handbooks for ethics, the lemma 'forgiveness' can hardly be found. At most, there is a reference to some religious traditions, from which philosophical ethics has 'emancipated' itself since the Enlightenment.^[1] In Christian ethics, however, forgiveness is a central concept. Reinhold Niebuhr speaks about the doctrine of forgiveness as 'the crown of Christian ethics', and Paul Lehmann speaks not less highly of forgiveness when he calls it the *summum bonum* of Christian ethics.^[2]

Apparently, there is a contrast between the weight ascribed to forgiveness by secular and by Christian ethics. In this essay I hope to show that secular ethics is certainly right when it is rather reluctant with regard to forgiveness, but that at the same time it misses out on something by hardly giving any attention to forgiveness at all. I also think that Christian ethics, in turn, misses out on something as well, when it attributes to forgiveness an exclusively religious or ecclesiastical meaning; forgiveness is a much more 'worldly', secular matter than it often acknowledges to be true. And also, we should add, much more difficult than it often thinks.

The liberal self

In the eyes of the Christian tradition, man is before everything else a receiver of forgiveness, who offers forgiveness (Matt. 18:21-35). This view of man is no longer very popular in our liberal culture – if it ever was popular. Liberal thinking centres round the autonomy of the individual. His moral identity (his self) precedes and transcends the relationships it starts and breaks off. The individual is (ideally) the sovereign possessor of his own life. He prefers to regard his relations with others in terms of a contract that he can enter into and break on conditions he himself establishes in freedom. Such a contract is mutual: it acknowledges the moral equality of the other. One owes the other what one has committed oneself to, no more, no less. If the debt cannot be settled, the relationship is severed. On the basis of the freedom of his individual autonomy, no one is *obliged* to maintain or to restore a relationship with someone who is in debt towards him or her. Forgive one another? That is possible, and it may do one credit. But there is no obligation to do it, and one cannot expect it from anybody, let alone demand it. In liberal ethics, forgiveness is what in the Christian tradition is called a work of supererogation, an *opus supererogationis*.^[3] It is not a moral demand. On the contrary, unforgivingness may

rather be a moral duty in some cases – if there is no expression of regret and satisfaction or if the moral debt is too great. For then one preserves one's own dignity and self-respect, while one also leaves the malefactor's autonomy intact.^[4] If he chooses to do so, every liberal 'sinner' should – in the words of the poet Willem Kloos – be able to take his own sins with him to his grave.

The liberal self regards his relationships as drawbridges, which it can pull up and let down at any moment it chooses. In this view of man, the self is an island of neutrality, which, like Switzerland during the war, thinks it can preserve its moral integrity by expecting loyalty from no one in particular and by showing solidarity to no one in particular. Tolerance is the highest liberal virtue; one has no special friends or enemies, nor a public moral judgement of other people's person or behaviour.

The liberal self is an individual without *history and solidarity*. His moral individualism and relativism also imply the absence of the experience of collective guilt, the participation in a community of guilt. (And only he who knows of guilt, also knows of forgiveness.) The assessment, the acknowledgement, and the settlement of debt between two parties involve the searching for a shared moral standard, with reference to which the debt may be established. But in a liberal view of man, in between individuals there is only a moral no man's land. What remains is at most *feelings* of guilt in one person and the *feeling* of being a victim in another person. In this connection, Gregory Jones speaks of a tendency towards 'therapeutic forgiveness': at most forgiveness becomes a part of the mental fitness programme of the individual realising himself.^[5]

On the other hand, an anthropology inspired by Christianity will emphasize that other people's life and fate are inalienable parts of the human identity, an intrinsic solidarity both in time and in space. As people, we are delivered up into one another's hands. They make us, but they also break us.^[6]

Cheap grace / the ecclesialization of forgiveness

That present-day culture removes itself from the Christian way of speaking about guilt and forgiveness is not only the fault of the culture, which says good-bye to its Christian sources, but also of the church, which has become disloyal to its origin. The

church has preached *cheap grace*, and it has used grace as a theological principle, as a self-evident *a priori*, a general truth. Cheap grace has been a mortal enemy of the church, which it has cherished in its bosom. Bonhoeffer denounced it in the thirties, when the Nazi regime was preparing the most gruesome crime in the history of humankind, while the church kept on preaching God's forgiveness from the pulpit, Sunday after Sunday, without accusing the sinner and his sin. It is no wonder that after the war the world does not want to know about this message of forgiveness any longer.

It is especially the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust who have criticized cheap grace. 'A world in which forgiveness is almighty becomes inhuman,' E. Levinas wrote. And, 'He who created the world cannot bear, cannot forget the crime that one man commits against another man'.^[7] Levinas appeals to the theology of the Jewish tradition, but one can ask oneself whether it is not rather the inconceivable history of Jewish suffering, which was tolerated, even occasioned, by the church, that has fed his resistance against forgiveness.^[8]

In this respect post-war secularization is to be regarded as a salutary divine judgement. A church that forgives so cheaply one had better abandon *en masse*. It preaches forgiveness, but it should seek it first. The church – Bonhoeffer had in mind particularly his own Protestant church in the thirties, including the Confessing Church, that remained silent about the persecution of the Jews – has scattered forgiveness like sweets, as if it does not cost anything. No regret, no repentance, no satisfaction to restore broken relationships. In its doctrine of justification it has concentrated too much on the sinner who receives forgiveness, while it has lost sight of the victim against whom is sinned. The church wanted to cover everything with the cloak of a God who is merciful to the sinner. It did not want to call sin sin in order not to inconvenience the sinner too much. However great his debt, it is forgiven him by God, the God of Voltaire: 'pardonner, c'est son métier.' By thus individualizing and spiritualizing forgiveness, by making it into a religious automatism for the individual believer, the church has minimized the ethical import of forgiveness. 'In dieser Kirche findet die Welt billige Bedeckung ihrer Sünden, die sie nicht bereut und von denen frei zu werden sie er recht nicht wünscht'.^[9]

Costly forgiveness cannot be self-evident. We can learn this lesson from Bonhoeffer. Forgiveness cannot be a right that one can demand. Therefore, it must be possible in some cases to

withhold it. Then, the demand for forgiveness is immoral. Then, judgement has to be postponed and eventually left to God. There exist moral debts that cannot be forgiven by people. That possibility should be left open. The camp physician who lets a Jewish mother choose which of her two children will have to go to the gas chamber (as in W. Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice*); the general who sends his bloodhounds to a child to play with it (as in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*), are these acts not unforgivable? The church should support Ivan Karamazov in his refusal to accept the harmony that is offered to the believer by belief in a God who forgives everything and everyone. With Ivan one should 'return one's admission ticket' to such a Creator. In view of this unforgivableness, it may be good to keep hell as part of Christian doctrine.^[10]

The churches of the Reformation came to their automatization and spiritualization of the message of forgiveness by way of resistance against another ecclesiastical perversion of forgiveness, which preceded the first one. The Reformation resisted the ecclesiastical monopoly of forgiveness that held people in its iron grip. By means of a detailed system of prescribed penances the church exercised authority up to the smallest soul and the highest throne (remember Henry IV's humiliating journey to Canossa!). By connecting forgiveness as a sacrament exclusively to the ecclesiastical office, it reached a virtually totalitarian disciplining of life.^[11] Luther broke with these practices. Although he maintained penance – Calvin abolished it –, it consisted for him only of two parts, penance (*contritio*) and faith. Both are God's work and stretch across the whole life of man. Forgiveness is a matter between God and man, not between ecclesiastical office and believer. And finally, good works are the fruit of God's forgiveness, not a condition for it. With this, Luther liberated Christian forgiveness from a centuries-old ecclesiastical captivity, in which it was not used to offer people a new future, but to enslave them.

In the thirties, when Bonhoeffer criticized the proclamation of cheap grace, it became clear that Luther's rediscovery of Christian freedom could later deteriorate into ethical indifference. We can conclude that in the history of the church, Christian forgiveness was threatened as much by 'Protestant' spiritualization as by previous 'Catholic' juridicization. The ecclesialization of forgiveness, whether in the confession box or from the pulpit, is responsible for the fact that in many respects it has rightly been forgotten and distrusted.

A human (im)possibility

And yet, present-day ethics, which thinks to be able to do without forgiveness, misses out on something. Forgiveness deserves to be rehabilitated, despite its derailments in the past. 'If God does not exist, everything is allowed,' was Dostoyevsky's adage, thus suggesting a direct relationship between secularization and moral relativism. 'If God does not exist, nothing is allowed. Everything must become more and more severe,' we read in Harry Mulisch's play on the twelfth-century heretic *Tanchelijn*. Then people are handed over to one another's judgement mercilessly, living together becomes an endless circle in which they seek one another's recognition, but cannot satisfy each other's expectations, and break down under one another's judgement. The result is a merciless society that only demands and does not give anything, because it cannot for-give anything either. 'Gott vergibt, die Öffentlichkeit nicht,' as a German discussion programme once had it.^[12]

That is why ethics needs forgiveness. That is why – we may add – ethics needs the biblical speaking about forgiveness. This addition does not spring from apologetical interests. It is supported in unsuspected quarters. It is the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt, who makes a plea for forgiveness in social ethics in her classical study *The Human Condition*.^[13] She does not regard society in the liberal sense as a construction of autonomous individuals, but as a network of relations, in which people participate in one another's life-story. Relations between people cannot be described in terms of means and ends. Neither can they be controlled, like a craftsman controls his material. They have their own statute and exist only in the milieu of acts (*praxis*) and language. The truss of society consists of this vulnerable web of the intersubjective 'in-between' of action and language. However, it is characteristic of this action that in its factuality it is irreversible in principle and unpredictable in its consequences. The past cannot be revoked, the future is uncertain.

This makes living together a hazardous business. There are two remedies – in this connection Arendt even uses the word 'redemption' – for the irreversibility and unpredictability of human action: forgiving and making promises. Arendt does not regard either of them as a transcendental gift, but emphatically as *human* possibilities which are born out of the necessity to live together. Without forgiveness, the deeds from the past would

remain hanging over the head of each new generation as Damocles' sword, and we would remain victims of the past. Without making promises we would not be able to start durable relationships with one another. Promises create islands of security in an ocean of uncertainty. Forgiving and making promises are interconnected, insofar as both regard living together as a form of mutual dependence, as *plurality*: we cannot forgive ourselves, neither does a promise we make only to ourselves mean anything. We are essentially dependent on other people, on their passing over our moral debt toward them, by which they liberate us from the past, on their trust that we will not make the same mistake in the future, by which they return to us our freedom.^[14]

According to Arendt, we owe the insight that in a community of people that want to live together durably, forgiveness is a necessity, to Jesus of Nazareth and to his influence on Western culture. He is the 'discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs'.^[15] Now, this word 'discoverer' needs to be nuanced. It suggests that forgiveness is a Christian invention. Among other things, that suggestion could perpetuate the false dualism between the 'Jewish' God of retribution and a 'Christian' God of forgiveness. Nothing is further from the truth. The Hebrew Bible speaks at least as compelling about forgiveness as the New Testament speaks about retribution (see for the latter, e.g., Rom. 12:9, but also Revelation). In the Hebrew Scripture, YHWH is 'the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin' (Ex. 34:6f., cf. Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). He also knows of punishment and retribution, but the third and fourth generation upon whom he visits these are but few in comparison with the thousands of generations that share in God's forgiveness. In the priestly writings, this belief is expressed in the institution of the Day of Atonement, on which the priests ritually make atonement for the transgressions of all the people. In the fourth petition in the liturgy of Yom Kippur, the book of Jonah is read, the story of the prophet who humorously is exposed as the Jew who did not want to forgive, contrary to the God of Israel himself.^[16] One can say that in the institution of the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:10ff.), forgiveness has become law.^[17] A number of biblical stories tell of God's forgiving character – the most famous of which is that of Joseph, in which people's evil is 'intended for good' by God (Gen. 50:20), but one can also think of the reconciliation between Jacob and Esau (Gen. 32 and 33).^[18] Finally, in the prophetic literature, the image of a forgiving God, whose mercy is stronger than his anger, is predominant (cf. Hos. 11:8f.; Jer. 3:12;

Is. 54:8). The image of *this* forgiving God is also quite common in the Judaism of Jesus' time.^[19]

Probably, Arendt would agree with all this from her own Jewish tradition. Why, then, is Jesus put forward exclusively as the 'discoverer' of forgiveness? Because she adds something: Jesus expressly lets forgiveness play a role 'in the realm of human affairs.' He makes that forgiveness is more than a religious category; to him, forgiveness becomes a demand of political ethics. Arendt places all the emphasis on Jesus' genial insight into the structure of durable human togetherness.^[20] In his preaching and his way of living, Jesus, as it were, takes forgiveness out of heaven and declares it to be a human necessity *and* possibility. The Old and the New Testaments are not opposed to each other as justice to love, the Law to the Gospel, a God of revenge to a God of love, retribution to forgiveness. Neither are they related as conditional versus unconditional forgiveness; Christian forgiveness, too, implies conversion (cf. the 'so that' and the 'if' in Mark 11:25f.). The Promethean revolution that Jesus started – and with which he radicalized the Jewish tradition – is that he has fetched the divine fire of forgiveness out of heaven for us, and that he has shown that it is enclosed in our own action as a possibility and a necessity. 'Your sins are forgiven,' Jesus says to the paralytic in Capernaum. 'Who can forgive sins but God alone?', the scribes and Pharisees respond, appalled. But Jesus answers, 'that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' (Luke 5:17-25). To Arendt, all emphasis here lies on this 'on earth'.

Apparently, not only God has the authority to forgive, forgiving is a *human* capacity. More than this, he even makes God's forgiveness dependent on human forgiveness. Jesus' comment on the petition in the Lord's Prayer, 'Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors,' is: 'For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins' (Matt. 6:14f.). This conditional character of divine forgiveness is powerfully underlined by the parable of the servant whose great debt is cancelled by his master, but who, in turn, is unwilling to cancel a small debt of a fellow-servant (Matt. 18:21-35). In the end, his fate is torture instead of the initial cancellation of debts. 'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart' (v. 35; cf. Mark 11:25; Luke 17:3f.). Jesus thus ethicizes divine forgiveness and strips the cultic and ritual framework from it. He forgives the people at home in Capernaum, no

longer in the temple in Jerusalem. In this way he introduces forgiveness into 'the realm of human affairs.'

In Arendt's view, Jesus introduces into his way of living and into his parables the idea of forgiveness as a common daily work, up to seven times a day (Luke 17:4), if necessary even more: up to seventy times seven times (Matt. 18:22). The judgement on what are unforgivable crimes in our eyes, in the size and the nature of which 'radical evil' reveals itself – when the malefactor consciously persists in doing evil, or when the evil done is greater than that which we could punish; quite shortly after the war, the Jewess Arendt imposes on herself a severe asceticism in her descriptions of this evil – this judgement is God's on the Day of Judgement, when it is the time of retribution (*apodounai*), and no longer a time of forgiveness (*aphiemi*) (Matt. 16:27). But in ordinary life, according to Arendt, forgiveness offers a wholesome opening and it is capable of restoring broken relationships. As such, it is the exact opposite of revenge, which keeps perpetrator and victim captive in an endless vicious circle, because the roles are continually reversed. Revenge is based on repetition; for each blow one can expect a counter-blow. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is a creative, innovative act, which is unpredictable, and which one should not expect; there is no right that corresponds to the duty to forgive. In Arendt's view, forgiveness is thus an act *par excellence*: here a man really does something *new*.

The structure of forgiveness

Arendt's placing of Christian forgiveness 'in the realm of human affairs' deserves to be supported. Jesus introduced forgiveness as a necessity and a possibility for each form of durable human togetherness. The question that, remarkably, Joseph leaves unanswered and in the end leaves up to God (do I have to forgive my brothers publicly?), Jesus answers unhesitatingly with yes. In the Gospel God remains the one who forgives first, forgiveness finds its origin in Him. But it does not remain in Him. He is no longer the only one and the last one. God's forgiveness is taken out of the temple and with Jesus it is placed on the street. Arendt could have referred with more emphasis to Jesus' own way of living, in which forgiveness receives a social form. His appearance begins when he undergoes the 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mark 1:4), and ends on the cross, when he seeks forgiveness for his murderers, who do not know what they are doing (Luke

23:34). And in between those two lies the table-fellowship with Pharisees, whores and tax-collectors, in which Jesus embodies God's forgiveness. In between, also, lies the calling and building of a community with his disciples, a social experiment, in which forgiveness and repentance were raised to the level of imperatives (Luke 17:4; Matt. 18:15-18, 21f.). In between, also, the many healings, in which restoration of the body and forgiveness of sins go hand in hand (Luke 5:17-26).

In this connection, the most wonderful story is that of the tax-collector Zacchaeus's conversion in Luke 19. Here the essence of Jesus' practice of forgiving becomes clear: he that experiences God's forgiveness, becomes himself 'automatically' a for-giving man amongst people. Here, God's grace fertilizes human relationships, so that religion and ethics are joined almost seamlessly. In Jesus' action we see something of the transcendent abundance of divine giving, that which Ricoeur has called God's 'économie du don', 'la logique de l'abondance'. God's grace as an abundant source that never runs dry (cf. Rom. 5:15-21; Eph. 1:7; 2:7; 2 Cor. 9:14). The conditional relationship between repentance and forgiveness remains intact. Forgiveness is a relational concept. It takes place between perpetrator and victim. The perpetrator who does not want, seek and accept forgiveness from his victim, does not participate in it. There are conditions to forgiveness. In this, Jesus is not different from his Jewish tradition. But apparently, for Jesus the urgency of forgiveness is so great, the pressure to force forgiveness so strong, that he cannot wait till the debtor himself takes the initiative. Jesus' unexpected, creative initiative to restore relationships - 'I must stay at your house today' - is so self-assured, the anticipatory trust expressed in this is so great, that it generously precedes penance, which follows almost automatically. In this 'zuvorkommendes Handeln' (Rendtorff)^[21] of Jesus, the *logical*, implicating relation between repentance (regret and penance) and forgiveness remains intact, but its *causal* aspect casually moves forward in time. First forgiveness, then confession of sins and penance, and not the other way round, that, apparently, is the Christian order.^[22] First, in anticipation, the experience of restored fellowship, then, 'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount' (v. 8).

The story about Zacchaeus can be used to illustrate several central moments in the structure of the process of forgiveness. It becomes clear that forgiveness is more than a change in feeling, an inner turn, or a single, isolated act. Forgiveness is a social

process, with its own dynamics. The *aim of forgiveness* is the eventual restoration of broken-down moral relationships. This future-oriented, prospective aspect is primary. Forgiveness does not end in the present, a change in feelings towards others, nor does it end in the past, in passing over the debt. It is true that both are essential. Without the freedom of the initiative as a catalyst – in this case Jesus' initiative, who speaks up for the victims – the process of forgiveness does not get started. Without a new redescription and re-collection of the past (the retrospective aspect of forgiveness), there is no shared future. Zacchaeus's history of extortion, then, is openly mentioned by name by the people ('a sinner') and publicly confessed by himself. Simply forgetting and 'letting bygones be bygones' is precisely what forgiveness is not; it is: recollection.

But he who seeks and offers forgiveness, shows that he does not want to shut himself up in the past, does not want to be dictated by the past. Forgiveness may deal with a new relationship to the past, but it really is about the future: the will to live together again in one moral community. Zacchaeus, 'a sinner' (v. 7), is declared to be 'a son of Abraham' (v. 9) again.

The *consequence of forgiveness* is Zacchaeus's promise of restitution and satisfaction towards his creditors. Retribution is an essential part of forgiveness. It is its distinguishing feature and its condition. 'If you steal my pen and say "I'm sorry" without returning the pen, your apology means nothing,' archbishop Desmond Tutu said in his position as chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.^[23] In the story of Zacchaeus, the moral roles are reversed: he had approached the poor as their creditor, but now he himself owes them and seeks their faces. He promises to give them up to four times the amount he has taken from them. Something of the abundant 'économie du don' of God himself comes through in this excess of satisfaction. It is a punishment that the one who is forgiven takes upon himself freely and with dedication, which he even imposes upon himself.

There may be another aspect to this excess. A condition for the progress of the process of forgiveness is the acceptance of the satisfaction by the victim. In the final analysis, it is the *victim* that forgives. In this story, in which Jesus, with his initiative, has vicariously anticipated the role of the victims, it is as if Zacchaeus wants to minimize the chance that the victim of his extortion will not accept his reparations.

Is, then, forgiveness really something else than justice? For retributive justice is also directed at a restoration of mutuality, and therefore requires satisfaction and sanctions. In this respect there is a clear kinship in structure between justice and forgiveness. It seems to me that the difference lies in the radicality with which the subjectivity of perpetrator and victim are involved in the process. The offer of forgiveness by the victim, the regret and the will to give satisfaction by the perpetrator make them into different people to themselves and to one another. In the common will to acknowledge the past, which leads to a shared reading of the facts, in the will to establish new relations, forgiveness transcends justice and something of love becomes visible. This love touches and changes the heart.

The beginning of forgiveness lies in Jesus' initiative. The circle of violence and revenge, of suffering evil and doing evil, often cannot be broken but from the outside (*extra nos*) – as is obvious in political conflicts. *Someone has to be the first*, either a mediator from outside, who has no personal interests in the matter, or one of those involved, who places himself outside of the circle of violence and resentment. In both cases, it is a matter of creation out of nothing. *Ex nihilo*. A risky act, which is not given beforehand, which is not self-evident. Something really new. There is a transcendent moment in forgiveness. The insight that, for the parties involved, there is no future but a common one is a condition for forgiveness, but in and of itself it does not lead to forgiveness. The insight that both burying oneself in one's right as a victim and the denial of one's debt as a perpetrator are dead ends, is in and of itself insufficient.^[24] Like the son in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:20), someone has to *get up* and actually take the road towards forgiveness. In the story about Zacchaeus, Jesus embodies this role. He himself *is* not the process of forgiveness, but he does start it. He speaks to Zacchaeus and invites him to practise fellowship, an art which the latter, being a moral outsider, had long forgotten. However, Jesus does not point to his debt, but calls him by name: 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today' (v. 5). Here more than justice is done, here love is active.

Finally – or should we say: to begin with? –, *the source of forgiveness* in all this is ultimately God himself. The creative call to Zacchaeus, which breaks open the status quo and starts the process of forgiveness, is placed by Jesus within the framework of his mission: 'The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost' (v. 10). The messianic-eschatological consciousness in which Jesus lives, makes forgiveness an urgent matter. It is the

for-giving Father – who endlessly gives and gives again (Luke 15:12-32)^[25] –, who is present in Jesus.

In this connection, H. Arendt's political philosophy is somewhat insufficient. She tries, as it were, to completely de-theologize Jesus' social 'discovery' by peeling away the overwhelming experience of God in which it is embedded.^[26] However, Jesus' intense and intimate fellowship with the giving God not only leads to the 'discovery' of forgiveness, but this experience is also the ultimate ground for the justification of forgiveness. In forgiveness, there is a creative moment of grace, a break between the past and the future that comes 'senkrecht von oben', which leads to a turn, a conversion in and between people, which makes it impossible to present it as self-evident or as a demand. This has consequences for ethics. According to me, forgiveness cannot be described as a moral rule, or as a general moral obligation. Forgiveness is a good, not a duty. At most, it is an obligation for those, Christians, for example, who have freely accepted it as a duty. In this sense, forgiveness is a *religious* 'duty' (which Christians often do not fulfil, because they cannot do it, or because they do not want to do it for moral reasons).^[27]

Forgiveness is a process, a communicative cycle between perpetrator and victim, a chain from which no links can be broken away without stopping the process. But what if the perpetrator does not experience remorse, does not want to know about satisfaction, or is unattainable (for example, because he has died)? Is forgiveness desirable in such a case? Is it possible? A Christian account of forgiveness invites one to take an extreme step without compelling to take it: the victim takes this step when he is willing to take upon himself the powerlessness or the unwillingness of the perpetrator to bear the burden of his guilty past. Thus, the person to whom evil is done, as it were, doubly bears the evil and its consequences: once as the victim, and another time by accepting the fact that the perpetrator will never settle his debt. In this way, the perpetrator is to some extent forgiven his unforgiveness. In this connection, one could speak of a 'vicarious sacrifice', on an analogy of the story that the Christian tradition tells about Christ.^[28] But I think that this kind of speaking on forgiveness goes beyond the limit of what one can expect of human possibilities. This is holiness. And one cannot require from others what one requires from saints (Levinas).

The church as a forgiving community / forgiving as a social practice

In the circle of Jesus' disciples, forgiveness as a God-given, human necessity and possibility was practised in the form of a social experiment. The above-mentioned parable of the forgiven, but non-forgiving servant (Matt. 18:21-35) points to the intrinsic coherence between the experience of divine and that of human forgiveness. The preceding biblical passage illustrates how the Jesus community actually practised the process of forgiveness, and sought an institutional form for it: 'If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church (*ekklesia*); and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax-collector' (Matt. 18:15-18).^[29] In these words – in which the times before and after Easter blend together –, it is clear to what extent Jesus' practice of forgiveness is followed in the church. But it seems that Jesus does not want to limit forgiveness to the circle of those who belong to him. He speaks not only of the brothers in particular, but of the people in general. 'For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins' (Matt. 6:14f.).

The experience of the resurrection is interpreted in the young church as a renewal of creation, a renewal, also, of the old social relations, as it had started with Jesus. After Pentecost, then, the church continues Jesus' practice of forgiveness. 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven' (John 20 and 21; 20:22f.).^[30] For the early church, forgiveness in the footsteps of Jesus is not a principle, an idea, a feeling, but a *social practice*.^[31] The church forgives in his Name (Luke 24:47; Acts 7:60; 10:43; 1 John 2:12). It is no longer the person of Jesus, but the memory of him in his stories, and the symbols of baptism (Acts 2:38; Hebr. 6:1f.; cf. Mark 1:4 par.) and the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:28) that make present the authority of God's 'zuvorkommendes Handeln'. The church understands itself as an eschatological community, in which the old, unforgivable person is renewed in a process of sanctification, a 'politics of forgiveness' (McClendon). 'Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you', this is the law of life in this community (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13).^[32] The church becomes the social space for testing and

practising the new social relations, in which not only the spiral of violent revenge, but also the retribution of 'eye for eye, and tooth for tooth' must be overcome (Matt. 5:38ff.).^[33] Is this ideal aiming too high? The recognition that there are and remain *enemies* shows the realism of the Jesus community. Not all enemies will become friends, and some initial friends may later become enemies. The least – or is it the most? – that is asked of it is, however, that it *loves* its enemies (Matt. 5:44). One should not want to break off definitively moral communication with them. Continuously – 'as far as it depends on you' (Rom. 12:18) –, one should keep open the possibility of a restoration of moral equality by the settlement of moral debts.

The politics of forgiveness

The aim of Jesus' introduction of forgiveness as a human possibility and a social practice was a renewal of human togetherness. He stood at the beginning of a new urban, cosmopolitan culture, in which enemies and strangers are increasingly condemned to forms of living together closely, even if, initially, they do not want or cannot do that. In our global society, the necessity of forgiveness only seems to increase. There is less and less room for an *exit option*, in which the guilty ones and the victims can leave one another's world. They are condemned to togetherness.^[34]

To what extent should the Christian church want to make this practice of forgiveness valid also outside of its own social circle? In the history of the church, this question has been the cause of significant differences of opinion. One time forgiveness is shut up in the church sacrament, in preaching, or it is limited to the circle of the Christian community, another time it is generously poured out over the world, as if the eschaton has already started. In my view, the biggest mistake the church can make is to ascribe to forgiveness an exclusively religious or ecclesiastical meaning. It has been my argument that forgiveness is a God-given, secular, human possibility. However, the biggest mistake but one which the church can make is to want to compel the world to forgive *at all costs*. Sometimes, there is no place for forgiveness, not even from a Christian standpoint, and it would only make things worse. Sometimes, people cannot forgive, and even in case it is socially desirable no one can morally compel them to do it. And in some cases, it is even socially undesirable to speak of forgiveness, because it is too early, or too late, or simply out of place.^[35] The guilty person has no remorse

whatsoever, or he is no longer available, the crime was too great, the victims are dead and there is no one who can speak for them. Sometimes only God can forgive. That is, sometimes we can only commend people unto God's forgiveness.^[36] God is not only the source, but also the limit of forgiveness. Speaking of forgiveness remains wholesome and bearable only as long as it continues to view forgiveness as an impossible possibility.

^[1]See, e.g., P. Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*, Oxford 1991.

^[2]Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, New York / London 1932, 223; P. Lehmann, 'Forgiveness', in: John Macquarrie / James Childress (eds), *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, London 1986, 233-236, 234.

^[3]J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford 1971, 117.

^[4]J. Murphy, 'Forgiveness and resentment', in: Jeffrie G. Murphy / Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, Cambridge 1988, 14-34, 18f.

^[5]L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, Grand Rapids 1995, 47ff.

^[6]Cf. Knud E. Logstrup, *Die ethische Forderung*, Tübingen 1959, 7ff.

^[7]E. Levinas, *Difficile Liberté*, Paris 1963, 37.

^[8]Cf. also Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'imprescriptible: Pardonner? Dans l'honneur et la dignité*, Paris 1986, esp. 43, 48, 50, 75.

^[9]D. Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge* (1937) (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Munich 1989), 29.

^[10]Jones, *o.c.*, 252. Even if one hopes with Jones that hell remains empty.

^[11]Up until the third century, ecclesiastical confession was mainly public in character. From that time on, individual confession and penance grew to be a sacramental-judicial system, especially in the West. The sacrament of penance channelled divine forgiveness in a triple process of *contritio cordis* (repentance), *confessio oris* (the oral acknowledgement before a priest), and *satisfactio operis* (penance, prescribed and

controlled by the church). See the articles 'Busse' (R. Hermann) and 'das Busswesen' (P. Meinhold) in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 1, Tübingen 1957³, 1534ff. and 1542ff., resp.

[12] Cf. also R. Burggraeve, who writes about the 'terror of ethics', in his *De bijbel geeft te denken*, Louvain / Amersfoort 1991, 221.

[13] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago / London 1957, 236ff.

[14] 'But trespassing is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action's constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly. Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new' (*Ibidem*, 240).

[15] *Ibidem*, 238.

[16] Armand Abecassis, 'L'acte de mémoire', in: Olivier Abel (ed.), *Le Pardon: Briser la dette et l'oubli*, Paris 1991, 148-168, 168.

[17] Françoise Smyth, 'La transgression des origines', in: Abel (ed.), *o.c.*, 62-82, 80.

[18] Even in the story of Cain and Abel, God shows his mercy to some degree by putting a stop to vengeance (Gen. 4:13-16). See on this Donald W. Shriver, Jr., *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics*, Oxford 1995, 22ff. On Joseph, see C. Houtman's contribution in: C. Houtman et al. (eds), *Ruimte voor vergeving*, Kampen 1998, 31-44. Cf. also Theo L. Hetteema, *Reading for Good: Narrative Theology and Ethics in the Joseph Story from the Perspective of Ricoeur's Hermeneutics*, Kampen 1996.

[19] E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, London 1993, 34. It remained common in the rabbinical tradition. See Louis E. Newman, 'The Quality of Mercy: On the Duty to Forgive in the Judaic Tradition,' in: *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 15/2 (Fall 1987), 155-172.

[20] What Socrates meant for our insights into the essence of thinking, Jesus meant for our insights into the faculty of action, Arendt maintains (*o.c.*, 246f.).

[21] Trutz Rendtorff, *Ethik: Grundelemente, Methodologie und Konkretionen einer ethischen Theologie*, vol. 1, Stuttgart 1980, 52.

[22] Cf. Dirkie Smit, 'Confession-Guilt-Truth-and-Forgiveness in the Christian Tradition,' in: H. Russel Botman / Robin M. Petersen (eds), *To Remember and to Heal: Theological and Psychological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation*, Cape Town 1996, 96-117, 103.

[23] Cited by Shriver, *o.c.*, 224.

[24] In many political processes of reconciliation, this creative moment of the mediator or substitute is visible. Cf. Shriver, *o.c.*,

[25] That does not mean that penance and repentance can be left out. In the call to repentance, too, God is the one who continually gives and gives again.

[26] Cf. Arendt, *o.c.*, 238f.: 'The fact that he [Jesus of Nazareth, FdL] made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense.' For Arendt, forgiveness belongs to 'certain aspects of the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth which are not primarily related to the Christian religious message but sprang from experiences in the small and closely knit community of his followers.'

[27] In an interview following the letter with which I started this essay, the author of the letter, Paul Kuiper, declared, 'What I resent is the easy chatter about forgiveness, in which, to be honest, I myself also used to be involved. (...) I do not believe that it is a Christian command to forgive whatever the cost. (...) The Bible is not a book about etiquette, not about "What is the proper way to do it." The biblical stories are stories about people. About their strength and their powerlessness. About what some of them could do at certain moments, while others could not. Neither do I say, "I will be glad if at some day I will be able to do it." I am not convinced that I should be able to do it. I only know that I cannot do it now.' (*Trouw*, 6 February 1998).

[28] John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance*, Oxford 1996, 240f.

[29] The next passage on 'binding' and 'loosing' has been clericalized and sacramentalized in the history of the Church. See for a more balanced reflection on the relations between church, office, sacrament and forgiveness: Hans Küng, *De Kerk*, Hilversum 1967 (trans. of: *Die Kirche*, Freiburg 1967), 379-386.

[30] Cf. Jones, *o.c.*, 130ff.

[31] Cf. Jones, *o.c.*, *passim*, following A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, London 1981. MacIntyre, *o.c.*, 187, describes 'practice' in an Aristotelian sense as 'any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity.' Cf. also James Wm. McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, Nashville 1986, 209ff., who speaks of 'the politics of forgiveness' as a character-determining 'skill' within the Christian 'practice of community establishment and maintenance' (229).

[32] R. Bultmann, 'aphiemi,' in: G. Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, Grand Rapids 1964, 509-512, 512. Cf. also Shriver *o.c.*, 43ff., McClendon, *o.c.*, 219ff., John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, Grand Rapids 1972, 115ff.

[33] This does not mean that there is no longer a place for restitution and punishment. Shriver, *o.c.*, 44, describes the church ethics of the early church as 'a process of restorative justice with room in it for punitive justice.' But punishment and satisfaction both have their place within the framework of the practice of the new community which 'shares in the friendship of the triune God' (Jones). Even so, in 1 Cor. 2:5-10 Paul illustrates how tiresome this process can be. For the seed of forgiveness that is already enclosed in the 'eye for eye, and tooth for tooth' of the *lex talionis*, see R. Burggraave, *o.c.*, 237ff.

[34] In this connection, the ecumenical theologian Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, *The Art of Forgiveness: Theological Reflections on Healing and Reconciliation*, Geneva 1997, 80ff., pleads for cancellation of the financial debts, with which the rich, industrial countries have an economic hold on the Third World. Meanwhile, his plea has been turned into an ecclesiastical action ('Jubilee 2000'), whose aim is the cancellation of the unpayable

debts of the poorest countries at the beginning of the next millennium.

[35] Cf. the Christian plea for *wrath* and *retribution* in the new South Africa by Willa Boesak, *God's Wrathful Children: Political Oppression and Christian Ethics*, Grand Rapids 1995. See in the same context the moving, personal plea for *lament* by Denise Ackermann, 'On Hearing and Lamenting,' in: Botman / Petersen (eds), *o.c.*, 47-56.

[36] That would also be my answer to Simon Wiesenthal's well-known question in his autobiography *The Sunflower*: what would you do if you were in my situation: actually forgive the dying Nazi soldier who asks my forgiveness for the crimes he has committed against fellow-Jews, or not forgive, or – as Wiesenthal himself did – get up in silence and leave. According to me, Gregory Jones's answer ('I cannot speak for your victims – and, perhaps, I cannot even speak for myself – but in the name of God I embrace you, and I tell you: "Your sins are forgiven".' (*o.c.*, 288)) goes too far. We can appeal to God, but we cannot put ourselves in his place.