# CHAPTER 2

#### WORKS OF FAITH, FAITH OF WORKS

# A REFLECTION ON THE TRUTH AND JUSTIFICATION OF FORGIVENESS

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ABSTRACT. This essay is a reflection on how South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has articulated and defended the proposition that reconciliation affords victims of human rights abuses the opportunity to forgive their tormentors. While certainly not the only proposed benefit of reconciliation, the author believes that the controversy surrounding the TRC's call for forgiveness sheds light on the "problem of persuasion" that appears when institutional and quasi-institutional bodies attempt to generate public support for reconciliation.

Truth and Reconciliation. In the motion and instant of transition, this phrase issues a challenge to our understanding, politics, and faith. The meanings of its constituent terms are ambiguous, their relationship contested. How should we read the "and" that sits between "Truth and Reconciliation?" At times, these concepts and practices appear coupled; truth motivates reconciliation while reconciliation lends form to truth-seeking, helping to gather what Antije Krog rightly sees as the dizzying and sometimes paralytic array of truth theory – correspondence, coherence, deflationary, pragmatic, redundancy, semantic, double, logical, subjective, and so on (Krog 1998: 461). On the other side of the coin, however, these goods of transition may stand in opposition. It is possible that reconciliation overwhelms and exceeds conventional notions of truth, leading us with a vision of testimony in which, citing Derrida, "truth is promised beyond all proof, all perception, all intuitive demonstration" (Derrida 1996: 63). More troublesome, reconciliation has been criticized as an institutional ploy, a theo-poetic remnant of colonization that, according to Wole Soyinka, allows for the "remission of sin in the immediate context of the unfinished business of [such] criminality" (Soyinka 1999: 75). In this light, the sin of reconciliation is its omission of truth.

What is the truth of reconciliation? What justifies our faith in the idea that reconciliation can energize the work of politics? Central to the ongoing controversy over the form and outcome of the South African transition, these questions ask after the relationship between reconciliation and communication. In part, South Africa's reconciliation process is composed of argumentation that calls on citizens to employ particular modes and attitudes of communication. As Wilmot James suggested in 1995, reconciliation has entailed a "campaign of persuasion" (James 1995: 83). Citizens want to know why it is in their individual and collective interest to move from the idea to the experience to the practice of reconciliation. Certainly, such explanations are not easy to construct. The very occasion of reconciliation, historical animosity and deep disagreement over the nature of justice and equality, marks a moment when the grounds of collective agreement cannot be presupposed. Accordingly, a compelling defence of reconciliation requires advocates to recognize and bridge an enormous range of needs and opinions. Competing visions of post-*apartheid* democracy must be examined and somehow related. The contested theology of reconciliation must be translated into a secular language of nation-building. The dream of reconciliation must be explained such that it does not appear as a sacrifice that exacerbates the reality of *apartheid* injustice.

The potential for reconciliation has much to do with the means and limits of persuasion. In this essay, I want to consider how South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has articulated and defended the proposition that reconciliation affords victims of human-rights abuses the opportunity to forgive their tormentors. While certainly not the only proposed benefit of reconciliation, I believe that the controversy surrounding the TRC's call for forgiveness sheds light on the "problem of persuasion" that appears when institutional and quasi-institutional bodies attempt to generate public support for reconciliation. Precisely, when individuals perceive that "God has gone missing" or at those moments when the expectation of repentance is left unfulfilled by an oppressor, the claimed (theological) value of forgiveness can appear either hollow or contingent on the (political) problem of how to actualize justice in the wake of oppression and atrocity. If so, it may be necessary for advocates of reconciliation to supplement their case for forgiveness. To this end, it may be useful to define forgiveness as a mode of discovery and invention, a speech-act in which victims of violence are able to re-present their historical identity in a manner that cultivates both the potential (dunamis) and the *ethos* of collective (inter)action. Intended to promote dialogue between theological and political-theoretical views of forgiveness, and motivated by a fear that the South African reconciliation process is concluding prematurely, this redefinition of forgiveness may clarify why reconciliation is a process more than an act, its truth a commitment to the ongoing invention of those (communicative) goods that sustain political life.

The legacy of a negotiated revolution, an ambiguous post-amble, and legislation that plotted only the jurisdiction and technique of reconciliation, the TRC spent considerable time explaining the nature and potential value of its work. One of the striking features of this campaign was the Commission's claim that real reconciliation is neither cheap nor easy. At the first gathering of the Commission, for instance, Desmond Tutu argued that the "work of our Commission is helping our land and people to achieve genuine, real and not cheap and spurious reconciliation." The Commission's Vice-chairman, Alex Borraine, echoed this position when he noted, "It must be stressed as strongly as possible that reconciliation comes at a price. It is never cheap, it's always costly and it is always painful" (Borraine 1998: 4). Later, in his introduction to the TRC's *Final Report*, Tutu rendered the argument in more precise terms:

True reconciliation is not easy; it is not cheap. We have been amazed at some almost breathtaking examples of reconciliation that have happened through the Commission (...). On the whole we have been exhilarated by the magnanimity of those who should by rights be consumed by bitterness and a lust for revenge; who instead have time after time shown an astonishing magnanimity and willingness to forgive. It is not easy to forgive, but we have seen it happen. (TRC Final Report, Vol. 1; para. 71)

By description and enthymeme,<sup>1</sup> true reconciliation entails sacrifice. Frequently, the Commission argued that much of the cost of reconciliation would be borne by *apartheid*'s victims. In its call for testimony detailing the nature and extent of human-rights violations, the TRC asked citizens to step forward, document their experience, and reveal their suffering. This show of vulnerability – re-living past trauma on a public stage but with uncertain audience – led one member of the Human Rights Committee to note that the hearings were at times brutal and sometimes seemed bizarre and heartless (Gobodo-Madikizela 1996: 1).

In his explanations of the reconciliation process, Tutu maintained that while testimony might open old wounds and foster alienation, it could also pave the way to forgiveness (Tutu 1997: 1). Specifically, the Archbishop argued that the naming of offences and spoken narratives of suffering could motivate expressions of forgiveness that would both blunt the desire for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> *Enthymeme* is defined as (1) The informal method of reasoning typical of rhetorical discourse. The enthymeme is sometimes defined as a "truncated syllogism" since either the major or minor premise found in that more formal method of reasoning is left implied. The enthymeme typically occurs as a conclusion coupled with a reason. E.g. "We cannot trust this man, for he has perjured himself in the past" In this enthymeme, the major premise of the complete syllogism is missing: a. Those who perjure themselves cannot be trusted. (Major premise – omitted); b. This man has perjured himself in the past. (Minor premise – stated); c. This man is not to be trusted. (Conclusion – stated). (2) A figure of speech which bases a conclusion on the truth of its contrary, e.g. "If to be foolish is evil, then it is virtuous to be wise".

<sup>(</sup>Cf. http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/Figures/E/enthymeme.htm ).(Eds.)

revenge and encourage repentance from perpetrators. A step further, Tutu repeatedly used the testimony of Beth Savage to support his contention that forgiveness was beneficial even when it did not lead perpetrators to confess or apologize for their crimes (TRC Final Report, V: 39). Invoking a sort of post-lapsarian<sup>2</sup> logic, balanced carefully with the claim that *apartheid* was an objective evil, Tutu argued that "The victims of injustice and oppression must be ready to forgive. That is a gospel imperative" (Tutu 1994: 223). More directly, he noted in the Symposium following Simon Wiesenthal's challenging work *The Sunflower* that,

[F]orgiveness is not facile or cheap. It is a costly business that makes those who are willing to forgive even more extraordinary. It is clear that if we look to retributive justice, then we could just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing. It is practical politics. Without forgiveness, there is no future (Tutu 1998: 267-8).

Reconciliation is costly as it asks citizens to forgive offences that may well be unforgivable. At a theological level, the sacrifice is a gift, a conditioning cause or result of divine justification. In mainstream Christian doctrine, this position follows from the Pauline view that reconciliation is a "restoration of men to fellowship with God", and a human effort to "restore community and communication between enemies" (Kistner 1995: 80; Wells 1997: 3). Occasioned by violence, discovered at the "limits of life", reconciliation is an act, not a process (Taylor 1960: 84). It occurs as God's grace is received through (justified by) an "ethical" faith that facilitates the transcendence of conflict (*ibid.*: 65). Through the sacrifice of Christ and its remembrance, the gracious gift of reconciliation engenders human fellowship and restores humanity's covenant with God (*ibid*.: 48-59, 100). Both public and personal, this sea change depends heavily on the "undeserved love" of forgiveness (Smit 1996: 105; O'Neill 1999: 21). The ability to forgive transgressions allows both the remission of sin and the creation of "right relations." Moreover, as Robert Schreiter has argued, forgiveness is a "cause" of repentance:

We discover and experience God's forgiveness of our trespasses, and this prompts us to repentance. In the reconciliation process, then, because the victim has been brought by God's reconciling grace to forgive the tormentor, the tormentor is prompted to repent of evildoing and to engage in rebuilding his or her own humanity. (Schreiter 1998: 45).

Not uncontested, this view holds that human forgiveness begins as the oppressed give voice to their experience of suffering. The force of this lament, according to both William O'Neill and Robert Shriver, yields

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> A concept in Christian theology, referring to the doctrine of the Fall of Man and the subsequent expulsion from Paradise. (Eds.)

"memory suffused with moral judgment" and occasions contrition from oppressors. Far from forgetting, forgiveness is a confrontation modelled on God's outpouring love (Wells 1997: 5-6). A centrepiece of his *ubuntu* theology, Desmond Tutu has relied heavily on this kenotic<sup>3</sup> view to explain the value of reconciliation. An expression of human interdependence, forgiveness mirrors God's self-sacrificing love. Thus, as we recognize our dependence on God and neighbour, forgiveness appears as a productive vulnerability. The abandonment of sovereign identity allows humans to redress oppression through a (paradoxical) relation of difference (Battle 1997: 127). Forgiveness overcomes sin as it strives toward mutuality. The breaking down of the middle wall of partition" energizes the development of an "alternative society" (Battle 1997: 115).

Perhaps directed less at Tutu's position than at so-called *third-way theology*, many South African theologians have criticized the idea that forgiveness is a means of mediating conflict. Written at a time when reconciliation was a dream within the nightmare, the 1985 *Kairos Document* issued a trenchant critique of state theology and its "mainstream-church" counterpart. Concerned that it had undermined opposition to *apartheid*, the authors of this short tract redefined reconciliation, in part by distinguishing the attitude of forgiveness from its actuality.<sup>4</sup> The willingness to forgive "one another at all times even seventy times seven times", they claimed, is productive only when it is *preceded* by the "genuine repentance of the *apartheid* regime" (Kairos 1986: 34). In distinction to Schreiter's interpretation, the *Kairos Document* held that forgiveness was appropriate only when it followed contrition.

The *Kairos Document* is a reminder that the justification of forgiveness is risky when it justifies complacency in the face of oppression. Today, the signs of the times offer a similar warning: in the crucible of politics, realism may trump faith to the point where calls for forgiveness go unheard. Between the theological and the secular, citizens want to know what the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The concept of "kenotic" usually refers to the minority position in Christian theology that holds that Christ, in becoming man, surrendered part of the divine characteristics attributed to him as member of what is conceived to be the Holy Trinity. In the present text passage, however, the term rather refers to the idea of Christ's becoming man, *tout court*. (Eds.)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The Kairos Document noted,

it would be totally un-Christian to plead for reconciliation and peace before the present injustices have been removed. Any such plea plays into the hands of the oppressor by trying to persuade those of us who are oppressed to accept our oppression and to become reconciled to the intolerable crimes that committed against us. This is not Christian reconciliation, it is sin (Kairos 1986: 10).

"practical politics" of forgiveness will do for them in practice. In postapartheid South Africa, this case has not been easy to make. For one, the inspiration to forgive may be undercut by its very object - history. As Denise Ackerman points out in her discussion of narrative truth-telling, the experience embodied in testimony may or may not be recognized. Expressions of forgiveness may be overshadowed by conflicts over how to interpret the truth of a victim's story. If so, the intention of forgiveness is subverted by its expression. What it means to forgive is at odds with its meaning. At a structural level, the church's defence of forgiveness is haunted by its historical support of *apartheid*. Combined with the perverse consequences of *apartheid* theology, this legacy has led some critics to question whether it is appropriate for the state to sponsor a process of "corporate forgiveness". Closely related, debates over the form of postapartheid justice have problematized the value of forgiveness. Theological defences of forgiveness, like those proffered by Schreiter and Wells, tend to assume a reciprocity that has yet to appear. The architects have not apologized. Contrition and repentance have been in short supply at most amnesty hearings. This shortfall has bolstered the perception that calls for forgiveness contributed to a dispensation in which, according to Ingrid Woolard, there is "black rule and white power." Thus unable to see its transformative power, Anthony Balcomb and Hein Marais both suggest that forgiveness has come at the expense of social justice and material redistribution. Moreover, they echo Soyinka's claim that the theological grounds of forgiveness include a doctrine of systemic sin that clouds the difference between the objective evil of apartheid's oppression and its legitimate resistance.

The political features of transition have cast doubt on the warrants that back the call to forgive. A potential legitimation deficit for the TRC, this problem has led some to turn to Hannah Arendt's brief explanation of why forgiving is a basic (ontological) truth of politics. Surprisingly, however, many of these appeals have not related Arendt's account of forgiveness to the context in which it arises: speech and action. Creatures of plurality, action and speech sustain human appearance. They enact and embody initiative, allowing individuals to disclose an identity and enter into social relations. Thus, Arendt claims, speech and action are directed to the complex middle of human life. Beyond technical means or prescribed ends, each is a *process* that both reveals what stands between us and constitutes the substance of our relationships. However, this creative power is not without risk. Speech and action are boundless, unpredictable and anonymous. As such,

[H]e who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes "guilty" of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it, that process he starts is never consummated unequivocally in one single deed or event, and that its very meaning never discloses itself to the actor but only to the backward glance of the historian who himself does not act (Arendt 1958: 233).

We are doers and sufferers both and simultaneously.

The power of creativity, the initiative of beginning, comes at the cost of self-sufficiency. This lack is the motive and necessity of forgiveness, "the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action" (Arendt 1958: 241). A mutual release that alleviates the risk of hypocrisy and checks the will to violence, Arendt claims that the performance of forgiveness is a deeply personal enactment of love.

For love, although it is one of the rarest occurrences in human lives, indeed possesses an unequalled power of self-revelation and an unequalled clarity of vision for the disclosure of *who*, precisely because it is unconcerned to the point of total unworldliness with what the loved person may be, with his qualities and shortcomings no less than with his achievements, failings, and transgressions. Love, by reason of its passion destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others. (Arendt 1958: 242)

Significant ambiguity attends this view, the closure of that (relational) middle that sets humans into opposition and relation. On one side, forgiveness is a gift that may or may not be returned. Its desire, however, if composed as a call for the self to construct its lack *through* the other, may lend itself to a self-denigration where the possibility is ignored that love flourishes only as individuals cultivate and protect one another's solitude. On the other side, Arendt's notion of forgiveness is addressed to speech and action but appears to proceed outside of both. Or, as Jay Bernstein has put the matter,

the universality of the mutual recognitions forming the community of conscience leaves blank the question of determining the objectivity of the actions of those agents (Bernstein 1996: 36).

What is the relational content of forgiveness? Can it proceed through the medium of speech?

Addressing these questions directly, Bernstein contends that,

The act of forgiveness is an act of recognition through which, by releasing the transgressor from her deed I release myself from being hurt. Forgiveness must express my particularity as well as renounce it (Bernstein 1996: 62).

It is precisely this dialectic which is of interest to us. Forgiveness is rooted first in a specific sort of remembrance, a recollection of an offence that allows an individual/sufferer to re-present their experience and identity. Coherent but alone, this self is the hard heart of the sufficient/sovereign subject. Its sacrifice or renunciation, however, converts the alienation of melancholy into a process of mourning in which the past is remembered and overcome simultaneously. Thus, recalling the terms of the *Kairos Document*, the *attitude* of forgiveness is a moment of historical potential. In the best case (notably: forgiving that leads to expressions of contrition or remorse) this attitude reveals a shared non-identity that can be used to build norms of morality and justice. In the event that repentance is not forthcoming, however, the sacrifice of forgiveness is still productive to the degree that it excises the *force* of a transgression from the relational space of sociality, politics and history-making.

Cast as a performative act of recognition, and perhaps separated a bit from Bernstein's debt to Hegel, the logic of forgiveness shows an important rhetorical character, a tropological movement between the discovery of identity and the appearance of opposition that funds the invention of human identification. Evident in Jesus' last words, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do", this movement has several dimensions.

- 1. First, the call to forgive allows individuals to narrate a reply to the question, What has been done? In the face of trauma, this expression of experience enacts a process of "name giving" and constitutes a (re)discovery of identity.
- 2. Second, loosely analogous to consciousness-raising, this identity shows an oppositional form. Implicitly or explicitly, it announces a contradiction: the doings of an oppressor defy justification to the degree that they replace the relational quality of action with instrumental violence. In turn, concerned perhaps less with guilt than hypocrisy – the disparity between being and appearing – this contradiction marks a false appropriation of the Word, the heretical assumption that the power of speech and action is ours alone. Or as Walter Benjamin (1996) put the matter, forgiveness (retrospectively) delineates that moment when human action has supplanted the (relational) faith of language with the violence of law.
- 3. Third, however, the oppositional stance of forgiveness shows a commitment to the vulnerability of identification. The appeal to the Father, the Word of God, concedes that justice is borne of relations which humans cannot fully control. The assumption of identity is equally an assumption of lack. Thus, the character of forgiveness is precisely that, a sort of character or *ethos* in which the creation of shared meaning

and identification rests on the willingness to concede one's dependence on the other. This gesture can be read as both actual and potential. Lacking a corresponding expression of remorse, forgiveness is productive to the degree that it replaces the desire for revenge, a will to negation that lends standing to the very oppression it condemns, with a commitment to invent history. Performed in language, forgiveness is the act of faith needed to undertake the work of history. Alternatively, when forgiveness does motivate confession, it marks a common opposition, a condition of shared non-identity that can serve as a basis for dialogue.

If, as Kenneth Burke suggests, words about words are more than a bit like words about God, the distinctions that I am drawing are small but perhaps not insignificant. In the TRC's effort to explain and defend reconciliation, the Commission has sometimes defined forgiveness as an act of communication more than a communicative process that takes shape over time. If it was/is a campaign of persuasion, this approach may have sold the reconciliation process a bit short. Faced with a set of publics that have good reasons to doubt the theological case for forgiveness, there may be some persuasive benefit to the idea that forgiveness is an attitude, an ethos of collective life.<sup>5</sup> Both inside and outside language, perhaps across the political and the theological, it is an expression of faith in which the power of creativity is situated in a heartfelt commitment to mutuality that less fiats over difference than draws from it to reveal the necessity of human interaction. Far from closing the middle of human relations, forgiveness performs the middle voice and confronts us with the challenge of cultivating rather than declaring our politics.

To make an end, I want to tie these reflections to the overarching question that has called us together: the perplexing relationship between truth and politics. Viewed admittedly from a distance, the star of reconciliation seems to be fading. Perhaps, prematurely. With Thabo Mbeki's election as President of the Republic of South Africa in 1999, the stress of the transition now seems to rest on the reconstruction of society – the counterpart of reconciliation in South Africa's interim constitution's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> This is not an empirical claim nor does it presuppose an intentionalist view of persuasion. To the contrary, my suggestion is simply that traditional definitions of forgiveness may generate controversy to the degree that they do not take into account that the reconciliation contains both a theological and political dimension. While this controversy may be productive, it may also undermine the ability of quasi-institutional bodies like the TRC to explain the civic benefits of reconciliation. In this sense, the proposal here must be further developed to show that forgiveness can function as a modality of political representation.

post-amble – and overcoming the legacy of *apartheid* economics. However, if civil society is to play a role in this work, if economic interest is to be derived from experience rather than sheer institutional (or International Monetary Fund) mandate, the communicative processes that compose reconciliation may have a role to play. The much-heralded antipathy between political economy and reconciliation is cemented when the latter is stripped of its inventional power, its ability to discern the potential for collective action from the midst of historical opposition and violence. In some small regard, as a bit more than a choice and a bit less than a duty, the process of forgiveness may have a role to play here. At the very least, it is problem that will return to the commons as the Amnesty Commission concludes its business and announces its recommendations. How shall we speak of forgiveness then?

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