

## **Forgiveness: Continuing the Dialogue between Psychology and Theology**

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Forgiveness has a background in religious discourse and practice but there has recently been an explosion of research on forgiveness as a therapy that can be applied in secular contexts. That illustrates the migration of ideas and practices from religious to secular culture. However, in parallel, an active body of work on continues in theology.

My aim is to bring the psychology and theology of forgiveness into dialogue (Watts & Gulliford, 2004). Though psychological work on forgiveness as therapy is far superior to religious traditions in terms of developing clear procedural guidelines and relevant research data, religion retains a distinctive conceptual approach. It is arguable that, at some points, this is richer than the psychological conceptualization of forgiveness, and that there could be a continuing fruitful dialogue between theology and psychology about forgiveness. There are several points at which the psychology and theology of forgiveness have different emphases.

The religious approach tends to emphasise the ethical context of forgiveness whereas psychological approaches usually play it down. For religion there is a duty to forgive, whereas for psychology there is sometimes just personal benefit. It is an interesting question whether forgiveness delivers personal benefits as effectively if it is undertaken purely for personal gain. It is possible that forgiveness is more effective and helpful if people believe in the rightness of what they are doing. Ultimately there perhaps doesn't need to be a dichotomy between whether forgiveness is seen as right and proper, or whether it is advantageous. Forgiveness may work best when it is seen as both. Coventry Cathedral is an interesting example of a community that has consistently believed in the importance of forgiveness. Theirs is an inspiring story of altruistic forgiveness in action, both as an act of religious obedience, but also of human benefit.

In the religious world forgiveness is seen primarily as grace received and passed on, whereas psychology tends to see it as an initiative that is taken by the person concerned. Psychology is aware in other contexts of what a big difference attributions can make, so it is likely to make a big difference whether a person perceives forgiveness as something they initiate or something they pass on. Psychologists tend to see forgiveness as taking place entirely within the individual, though a religious perspective might see the individual as located in a stream of forgiveness that is bigger than themselves, and something they participate in. The 'extended' cognition perspective in psychology might also challenge, from a different perspective, whether forgiveness is to be located entirely within the individual.

The religious perspective on forgiveness as something received and passed on means that it is more likely to focus on issues about receiving forgiveness. It is

not easy psychologically to receive forgiveness, as it can be experienced as patronizing; it requires humility to accept forgiveness. There is much interesting psychological work left to do on how to help people receive forgiveness.

Psychology has tended to focus on isolated individual acts of forgiveness. In contrast, the religious approach tends to see forgiveness as resulting from the long-term cultivation of a capacity and disposition for forgiveness. For theologians forgiveness is more a craft or virtue than an isolated act. This raises issues about the personal capacity for forgiveness, and how that might be developed. This is a topic that has attracted surprisingly little attention in recent psychological research on forgiveness. However, psychodynamic psychology has a useful perspective on it from the perspective of object relations theory. It seems unlikely that people will be able to forgive until they can integrate positive and negative aspects of a situation and move beyond 'splitting'.