

Forgiveness I: Spiritual Perspectives on Forgiveness

Introduction

According to the Oxford Dictionary forgiveness is defined as “to grant free pardon and to give up all claim on account of an offense or debt.” Given this straightforward explanation of the concept, forgiveness might seem like a fairly simple topic. Yet psychologically it holds a multiplicity of clinically significant dimensions and raises many questions. How does forgiveness differ from condoning, excusing, or forgetting? Does forgiveness imply a reconciliatory action between victim and the one doing the harm? Does forgiveness need to be unconditional, as the Oxford Dictionary definition implies, or is a conditional forgiveness possible? Can forgiveness truly be given without a request to be forgiven, a gesture of apology, or feelings of remorse from the offender? Are there offenses for which forgiveness is either impossible or inappropriate? What about the relationship between self-forgiveness and being forgiven by the one you’ve offended? Can forgiveness be learned? What, if any, are the clinically significant mental and physical health benefits of forgiveness? Does forgiveness have any downsides? What are the cross-cultural dimensions of forgiveness?

In this and following lesson, some light will be shed on all these topics. However the last one serves as a useful starting point for this exploration. Long before the advent of the modern Western discipline of Psychology, with its empirical approach to knowledge and clinical applications, forgiveness has been a potent theme in the world’s religious traditions. The well-known adage “To err is human, to forgive is divine,” attributed to the English poet and critic Alexander Pope, suggests the strong connection we feel in Western culture between forgiveness and spirituality. Today the clinical applications of forgiveness, as studied by contemporary psychologists, are grounded to a significant extent in the perspectives on forgiveness and forgiveness practices of the world’s religions.

Taking a look at the beliefs and attitudes towards forgiveness found in various religious traditions provides valuable insights into the complexity of this topic. At the same time, knowledge about different spiritual approaches to forgiveness is important background information for clinicians regarding the religious/spiritual perspectives their clients bring to the clinical process of forgiveness.

Judaism

Different religious and spiritual traditions have characteristic beliefs about, and ways of approaching, forgiveness. Take for example the religious traditions whose roots lie in the Middle East: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In Judaism, forgiveness comes only from the one offended. As such, while offenses against God can only be forgiven by God, likewise an offense against a fellow human can only be forgiven by the offended person, though one may pray to God for His help in obtaining forgiveness from fellow humans. God’s assistance can also be requested for help with a guilty conscience, that is forgiveness of oneself.

Judaism also emphasizes the importance of having a forgiving attitude towards the wrongs others have done towards us. In fact, if someone has wronged us and then asked for forgiveness, withholding forgiveness shifts the moral burden to us for our unwillingness to forgive. Being forgiven is only possible if you, yourself, have forgiven others for their offenses against you.

Forgiveness is such a central theme in Judaism that one of its principal annual religious observances, Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement, is devoted to this practice. Prior to the day of Yom Kippur, it is the custom to ask for forgiveness from those persons you have harmed during the past year. This asking for human forgiveness is required in order to be eligible for forgiveness, or atonement, from God, for one’s offenses against Him, which is requested and received on Yom Kippur itself.

For more on Yom Kippur and forgiveness, watch the following video (7 mins.)

For a brief description of the three layers of forgiveness from a Jewish perspective read [“Elul: A time to reflect.”](#)

Christianity

In the Christian tradition Jesus offers a similar perspective. He said, “Forgive and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37, NIV) and “...if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (Mark 12:25 NIV).

Such verses suggest the requirement of our having an attitude or habit of forgiving others before receiving God’s mercy in return. Jesus’s death on the cross is widely held to be the sacrifice which makes Divine atonement for all human sins a potent reality.

Regardless of the requirements for God’s forgiveness, humans forgiving humans was strongly emphasized by Jesus in his teachings. When asked by his disciple Peter if we should forgive repeated offenses against us by the same person up to seven times, Jesus replied, “I do not say to you up to seven times but up to seventy-seven times.” Another well-known example of Jesus’s teachings on forgiveness is his Parable of the Prodigal Son. And of course Jesus set the bar quite high himself when, while dying on the cross, he asked God to forgive those who were responsible for his own crucifixion, even in the absence of their remorse for their actions.

For a Christian view of the unconditional nature of forgiveness, the role of apology, and the purpose of forgiveness by a Protestant theologian see Miroslav Volf below (7 mins.).

For a Catholic perspective on the accountability of the perpetrator in relation to forgiveness watch Johann Vento below (4 mins.)

Islam

In Islam, among the epithets for God are *Al-Ghaffar*, “The All Forgiving,” *Al Tawab*, “The Acceptor of Repentance,” *Al Rahim*,

“The Most Merciful and Compassionate” emphasizing God’s deeply forgiving nature. As such, like Christianity and Judaism, Islam places a great emphasis on asking forgiveness from God, who has the choice either to forgive or to punish. And yet in Islam it is understood that God’s mercy prevails over his wrath.

Forgiveness between humans is also important. Here Islam makes a distinction between forgiveness when we have no recourse for vengeance or retribution, and forgiveness when retribution is within our power, the latter being the more highly valued form of forgiveness. And just as God’s mercy is described as prevailing over his wrath, so in Islam, human to human forgiveness is associated with the control of one’s anger. In fact, one of the characteristics of the Islamic Believer is that “...when they are angry they forgive.” (al-Shura 42:37) Muslims are encouraged to reflect on their own need, as imperfect beings, for God’s forgiveness, as a reason to offer forgiveness in turn to their fellow humans. Forgiveness among humans is given a high societal value for its ability to heal wounds and promote reconciliation.

For a brief historical perspective on the societal role of forgiveness in Islam see the following video featuring Imam Sajid (1 min.).

In the video below Muhammad Nur Abdullah offers a Muslim perspective on counseling for forgiveness (5 min.).

Buddhism

While the Buddhist tradition also places a strong value on forgiveness, it approaches this topic from a different non-theistic angle. In Buddhism, forgiveness is seen as a skillful means of promoting internal harmony free from regret and inner conflict. Personal harmony allows for the cultivation of an inner collectedness and quietude of mind that in turn foster deep insight. Inner peace and the insights it makes possible are both required for liberation from the endless rounds of rebirth into the suffering of existence. According to Ajahn Passano of Abhayagiri Monastery, “If we haven’t forgiven, we keep creating an identity around our pain, and that is what is reborn.”

And yet the ability to forgive is also related to deep insight. The absence of forgiveness is characterized by thoughts of resentment, ill will, and even revenge grounded in challenging emotions like hatred. The Buddhist approach is to look deeply into the nature of these thoughts and emotions to discover their inherent impermanence and the emptiness of self making these judgments. It is this depth of insight that allows for the letting go of these mental afflictions and the unforgiving attitude they perpetuate. As the Buddha said in the Dhammapada:

‘He abused me, he struck me, he overcame me, he robbed me’ —in those who harbor such thoughts hatred will never cease. ‘He abused me, he struck me, he overcame me, he robbed me’ —in those who do not harbor such thoughts hatred will cease. Dhammapada 1.3-4.

With its emphasis on the Law of Karma, a parallel Buddhist perspective is that it is the transgressor, not the victim, who is most at risk. This viewpoint is used to encourage compassion and for those who have wronged us.

In the following video Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh offers a Buddhist perspective on forgiveness (4 mins.)

To hear the Dalai Lama’s Buddhist views on the different levels of forgiveness see (8 mins.)

Hinduism

The Hindu tradition offers a variety of views on the topic of forgiveness. From the theistic perspective we find in the Hindu scriptures a description of forgiveness as “the one supreme peace” (*Mahabharata, Udyoga Parva* Section XXXIII). In the *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna, an avatar, or human incarnation, of the god Vishnu, lists forgiveness as a Divine characteristic when embodied by a human being. In the more philosophical Hindu traditions, a transcendental view is taken. When someone is wronged, the reflection arises that this, too, is the will of God. We don’t need to focus on the one who has wronged us because they were just acting as the instrument of the Divine. Rather we can reflect on what lesson we can learn.

A less theistic Hindu might evoke the Law of Karma, of cause and effect. Yet being unable to discover all the causes leading up to the unfortunate effect, it is difficult to assign blame and therefore to engage in forgiveness. In fact from the Karmic perspective, everything that happens to us is the result of our own past actions in this or some previous life. As such, it is more skillful to acknowledge the impermanence of the transgression and let go. Letting it go prevents it from causing continued suffering in the present. Even the thought of forgiveness keeps the event alive in memory. As for justice, the Law of Karma itself will hold the perpetrator accountable.

For a brief, more mystical description of the role of forgiveness in relation to the Infinite in Hinduism from the nondual or Advaita perspective see the following videos featuring Anantanand Rambachand (2 mins. and 4 mins.).

For a Hindu Advaita or nondual view on forgiveness see

Denominational and Cultural Perspectives

While the above information gives clinicians a general sense of each major tradition's orientation towards forgiveness, it is important to also point out that there may be significant denominational variations within each major religion. For example, the forgiveness attitudes and practices of Christian clients may vary significantly depending on whether they are Catholic, Protestant, or Evangelical. A Mahayana Buddhist may take a different approach than a Theravadan Buddhist. Particularly with Eastern religions, perspectives may vary within a denomination depending on whether the practitioner is Asian, for example a Thai who grew up in a Theravadan Buddhist culture, or a white Anglo-Saxon American who learned and converted to Theravadan Buddhism in the West.

Further Resources

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A common theme regarding forgiveness across traditions seems to be the usefulness of distinguishing between the transgression and the transgressor. For more on this topic, see (3 mins.)

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