

Is there room for
forgiveness in
international politics
essay sample



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This essay is a response to Jean Bethke Elshtain's article on "knowing forgetting," a process whereby two parties "recognize that atrocities and violations occurred but not transferring the guilt to a people, especially not their descendants." As Elshtain goes on to explain, this forgiveness does not precipitate retribution or compensation for victims, instead the recognition that basic human rights were violated and nothing can be done to restore the lives of the victims.

The observation by Hannah Arendt, that forgiveness, such as that displayed by Jesus, can break unending cycles of violence. This idea is not confirmed in any present day example, it would seem specious to leave such an important component of "forgiveness" to leave represented in Christian Mythology. Modern examples were perhaps excluded because the nature of Elshtain's "forgiveness" requires to be viewed in hindsight and that a violation of human rights would be so vicious and chaotic that it must inevitably play itself out.

The article develops on the implied relationship of parties engaging in forgiveness, that they are renewing or repairing damaged relations; it is here that the reader is introduced to the concept of "knowing forgetting," that by being forgiven and having your sins forgotten, you can still retain a strong sense that what you did was wrong. "Knowing forgetting" appears applicable to examples such as the Holocaust and the American Slave Trade. It would be interesting to see how this theory would fare in circumstances where right and wrong were less clear-cut.

To accept Elshtain's proposal, it must be applicable to all modes of political activity; examples like Israel are screaming to be addressed. It has all

necessary history to be forgotten, the only difference is that the wounds are still fresh, time has not begun to heal. The next section of the article finds the theory of “ knowing forgetting” being applied to the Northern Ireland Conflict, by British Clergymen. It seems crudely ironic that representatives of one of the bloodiest religious movements in existence, while preaching the peace of their deity, are considered fitting flag bearers of Elshtain’s philosophy.

It is here we can see our first glimpse of “ knowing forgetting” in practice in a contemporary setting, unfortunately the collective efforts of Cardinal Cahal Day of Armagh, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican primate of Ireland, did not bring peace to Belfast or the rest of Northern Ireland. It seems that a large portion of both the theory of “ knowing forgetting” and examples of its practice; could one equate the necessary religious leap of faith of worshippers with the leap of faith the reader must take.

Unfortunately, some would argue, that like organized religions, the good intentions of “ knowing forgetting” do not translate well into action. In fact, the oxymoronic nature and ill-defined parameters make the article a fitting supplement to most religious texts. Although Elshtain recognizes the essential failure of his proposal-he feels that in today’s high charged political arena, politics will have to change to accommodate forgiveness.

There are those who would argue that forgiveness is more in the realm of psuedo-politics, a popular alternative with those politicians who’s carriers hang on the results of public opinion polls. The most serious argument that faces “ knowing forgetting” arrives when one must distinguish between

retaliatory action and what is “ necessary in order to prevent a wrong from being committed. ” There is no form of military intervention, by any government, that does not “ wrong” a people; is it not difficult to make a decent case for forgiveness if governments were aware of the damage they were doing?

On a simpler level, how, in the current atmosphere of political interaction, distinguish the victimizers from the victims? It would appear that without further definition the concept of “ knowing forgetting” is doomed to the archives of history and hindsight. To begin a more general thematic criticism of the article, I will employ some theories of Wilhelm Dilthey and other hermeneutic scholars. It would appear fitting to use religiously inspired to prove the weakness of an argument based loosely on the contribution of Jesus Christ to politics.

We are first of all historical beings before we become observers of history and because we are the former, we become the latter. “ 1 Dilthey claims that there is a distinction between the ‘ real past’ and the past, as we interpret it. He feels that it is historical reflection and not forgiveness that liberates man to act in the present. As we shed traditions of the past, we can see that tradition as being relative to many other traditions occurring at the same time.

This creates an index of human possibilities, balanced in the context that there must exist evil as well as good. I will go on to prove that this argument does not allow for the “ forgetting” if even knowingly, of past atrocities, and it certainly does not allow forgiveness the chance of seizing catastrophe in

mid stride. If we are primarily beings in history before we are observers of it, a complete judgment of events in our history is impossible to gauge until our entire history is complete, effectively the end of our existence.

If we cannot judge our actions in history as a whole, then we cannot pass judgment on magnanimous atrocities such as the Holocaust or the Slave Trade, accurately. Instead, we can argue, as Dilthey does: "What we set as a goal of our future serves the determination of the meaning of the past." ² An existentialist perspective reveals further weaknesses; they feel that historical events do not belong in the speculation of history as we manifest it.

Kierkegaard had this objection: Demoralized by too assiduous an absorption in world-historical considerations, people no longer have any will for anything except what is world-historically significant, no concern for anything but the accidental, the world-historical outcome, instead of concerning themselves solely with the essential, the inner spirit the ethical freedom. ³ Here, Kierkegaard is arguing for a move away from the importance of the interpretation of history all together. That it be seen no longer as a chronology of events and places but that it recognizes the possibilities of existence, thoughts similar to those of Dilthey.

The existentialists go on to bridge the gap between historical fact and the experience of the historical fact, by the concept of "future." The idea being that any historical phenomenon has its importance and significance rooted in later interpretation of it in the future. Following this argument, it would be

impossible to stem the tide of repetitive violence in medias res, because their significance has not yet been made clear.

It is therefore in the future and in action that we must find answers to the sins of our past; as Jurgen Moltmann states: Only he who is moved to participation in history, he who accepts responsibility for the future, can understand the ‘ language of history. ’” 4 Forgiveness is not necessarily a useful political tool; its questionable effects are only visible long after the wrongs have been committed. The notion of “ knowing forgetting” appears to misjudge the role our history plays in our future. It also fails to account for the fact that we cannot fully judge these actions at this point in our history.

It would appear more rational to see the action of the present towards the future as an assessment of our collective history and not. In light of these proofs, I would conclude that our history, relative to our time, must be manifested in our future actions. Our collective history has greatly changed in the last few hundred years; past civilizations had independent existences simultaneously, now we live in a global network. We have reduced the future of our existence on earth to a single indivisible destiny.