

Forgiveness: love relationship

ABSTRACT

The article highlights the relationship between forgiveness, relation and love. It is divided in three sections: an experience of forgiveness which took place in Burundi in the '90s, an outline of the culture of that country and some theories about forgiveness in the psychological field.

The giving of forgiveness is not immediate, but when the victim is able to grant it, he becomes a subject with the power to release himself from a oppressor-oppressed relationship, wherein, if he doesn't forgive, he might be trapped. Without a victim, there is no offender, even although the guilt and the crime remain as such.

By forgiving, conflict between victim/offender is overcome and the two parts enter into a relationship with each other. In a relationship, every time we connect with the other and we recognize him, we enter into a relationship with him and this recognition becomes a gift.

At this point forgiveness itself becomes a gift, because it has as its centre a gift, it becomes a relationship of love where I am able to recognize the other for what he really is.

KEYWORDS: forgiveness; ethnic conflict in Burundi; compassion; kindness; love.

* Correspondence regarding the paper should be sent to: Beatrice Gnudi, CIRPAS is Centro interuniversitario di ricerca "Popolazione, Ambiente, Salute" – Università di Bari, Piazza Cesare Battisti, 1-70121 Bari, e-mail: beagnudi@gmail.com

The title of this short paper may seem rather enigmatic. When I presented it to my faculty as a project for the thesis that I am discussing in October, a professor looked at me with surprise. What relationship could there be between these three words: forgiveness, respect and love?

Forgiveness is usually granted to those who have done us wrong, instead the love relationship is one between people who love each other. Psychology, unlike theology, has only recently begun to deal with forgiveness as a possibility for a person to find happiness and freedom again; in fact we are becoming increasingly aware that between the forgiver and the forgiven one a new relationship is established which arises from the act of forgiveness that prevents, among other things, vengeance, a source of further conflicts.

With this paper, I would like to present the testimony of a family that, in a Burundi shocked by the ethnic war of 1993/2003, was able to forgive the killers of three of its members. By doing so, they not only lived in peace and freedom, but they also avoided a never ending "feud".

This family, first of all the father, believed that forgiveness was the only option, the only way to personal and family peace, and to the peace of their community, the only way to set *victim and offender* free, demonstrating that even during war you can live in peace.

I will briefly put forward some features of the Burundian culture useful to understand the testimony better, and then I will present some theories about forgiveness in the psychological field.

SOMETHING ABOUT BURUNDI

Burundi is a small country with a territory slightly larger than Lombardy and it has about ten million inhabitants¹. Deep in the

¹ F.A.O.'s data 2005: population of Burundi 10,395,931.

heart of Africa it is rich in lakes and rivers, has a mild climate and a very fertile soil that allows two crops a year.

The official languages are Kirundi and French, the latter only known by a small number of people. In a commercial environment Kiswaili is also used.

The Burundian people was divided into three social classes (Kakmikazi, 2015), Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, and the children “inherit” from their fathers the belonging to one of the three classes. This practice is still common.

Colonization used the Western concept of ethnicity to create a clear cut separation between the three classes, in order to “rule” more peacefully (Kakmikazi, 2015). Currently, among the population, about 85% are Hutu, 14% Tutsi, and the remaining 1% are Twa (pygmy). It was common to think that the Hutus were dedicated to agriculture and the Tutsis to cattle breeding, although actually the separation was not so clear cut. The Twas dealt with small crafts, but they were strongly stigmatized by the other two castes (Kakmikazi, 2015). who considered them as impure.

Burundi is one of the most Christian countries in Africa, the Catholics alone represent 64.47% of the population², the remaining 35.53% is divided between Christians of other denominations (churches and numerous sects), Muslims, Hindus and a minority of Animists (about 1%).

The country has been independent from Belgium since 1962, but despite this apparent freedom, the people are still looking for a stable peace and the governments that have followed one another in the last 50 years, have not managed to promote ethnic integration yet.

After the independence, wars for the division of the power between the two main groups began. Sadly infamous and notorious in the international press are those of 1972 and 1993-2003. In the lapse between the two conflicts, other horrors were committed

² Statistical Yearbook of the Catholic Church 2013.

and all the classes have registered deaths, among them are both victims and persecutors.

The ethnic issue is almost taboo in families and children rarely know which ethnic group they belong to. The Arusha agreements, signed at the end of the conflict in 2003 established fair sharing of power, jobs, school education; and, at least apparently, Burundians tried to stick to them. But it cannot be denied that resentment, fear, alarm are still alive in the hearts of those who have lived through the atrocities. Those who were able to forgive have not forgotten.

It's still tradition that the groom provides for the home and its furniture and the bride for what is needed to make it habitable. Even today, in rural Burundi, men build their houses in their fathers' lands.

It is also useful to know that the festivals³ are rituals that gather around the "*impeke*"⁴ drink, the blood family and the enlarged one⁵. A problem or an event are solved and always celebrated with speeches and concluded by sharing the traditional drinks with the "*inaga*"⁶. Once this is done, unity is found and peace is restored among the people who were in conflict. If there were no conflicts the alliance is reinforced.

On October 21, 1993 President Melchior Ndadaye (Hutu) was assassinated. He had just won the elections in June of that year.

³ By festivals are meant all the celebrations in life: birth, in which the new-born is introduced to the family and the community, engagement to marry, marriage, the visit of the new bride's family in the new home, the mournings, harvest, etc.

⁴ Alcoholic drink made from bananas or fermented sorghum.

⁵ Not only the members of the blood family and the enlarged one are invited to the festivals, but also the neighbours, the work colleagues, etc.. One takes part in the festival by giving one's contribution in goods, money and material help. They are also important occasions to introduce children into society.

⁶ A vessel obtained from a cone-shaped pumpkin emptied and dried from which one can drink this delicious juice through straws.

This murder generated more violence among soldiers, rebels and civilians who did justice by themselves. In that period about 300,000 victims were estimated.

THE TESTIMONY

Let me now introduce the testimony. Simon was married with 10 children. His family was living near his brother's house. Because of the assassination of the president, he was warned to be prudent since his family could have been the next target of the "death squads"⁷. His wife, from a different ethnic group than her husband's, took refuge at her-brother-in-law's living nearby, where, unfortunately, she was killed with her brother in law himself and his wife.

After this event, Simon could have had good reasons for revenge. It was easy to recognize the voices that had resounded in the family property that night. Since the Burundian culture expected "revenge" he could have investigated more thoroughly, assisted by the children of his deceased brother, whom he adopted, and the men of his extended family. But Simon did not do it because, for him, forgiveness was the only possible way.

Let's briefly analyze the proceeding of events. Right after what happened, Simon, with some of his children, took refuge in a refugee camp. After some months it was possible to celebrate a partial mourning ceremony⁸ and his children asked Simon for justice by filing a lawsuit with the authorities. The father, who in the

⁷ Organized groups of people, armed with machetes and other tools, sometimes even weapons, ready to kill the "enemies". For further information see Bukuru, Z. (2004), *Les quarantes jeunes martyres de Buta*. Parigi: Kartala

⁸ In his culture, there are two stages concerning the mourning, a partial ceremony allowing the direct family members to resume work, and a final one allowing to settle the deceased person's outstanding matters, both financial and non-financial.

meantime had matured the idea of forgiveness, explained to them that looking for justice would not bring their loved ones back, on the contrary it would have been cause for more conflict and revenge. He pointed out to them that the children of the people who would have been found guilty, would have been left without parents. This loss could lead them to further revenge. In front of the children he was determined and, at the same time, meek in offering forgiveness as a valid alternative. I suppose it was not easy to convince the four adult children to accept forgiveness without justice but it was essential to him.

Moreover, despite the risks he could have run into, he looked immediately for a connection with the man who "might have been" responsible for the massacre of his family so that he could show him that he held no resentment and further bloodshed would be spared.

During the years when I was close to the family, although he did not hide the sorrow for the premature loss of his loved ones, I never saw desperation in Simon's face. On the contrary, he was a man of faith, who instilled hope and serenity. Today, his children still have a friendly relationship with this man.

I must say that the process of forgiveness was not easy; on the contrary, it was a challenge for the whole family. The children, each one personally, chose the same option as their father had chosen: forgiveness as the only possible way.

Furthermore, the older ones founded a theatrical association to bring together the youth of the town and in this way witness that it is possible to build peace through the dramatic arts and increase the bond among young people from different social classes. They were aware that there was a high probability that the children of the assassins of their family were present among the young people of the group. They had made a choice and they were going to carry it forward with determination.

On top of all this, at the University, in difficult times, because of the enduring ethnic conflicts, they themselves continued to be

a sign of contradiction by participating in activities promoting peace among different ethnic groups, even at the risk of their own lives.

They were so convinced of what they were doing that, for an important family celebration, Simon went personally to invite the alleged assassins of his wife. They were so touched by the gesture that they actively participated in the organization of the party, sealing, in this way, reconciliation. Through forgiveness, Simon's family "cut" at the roots the possibility of a "feud".

But what pushed them to such a courageous and difficult choice, even at the risk of their own lives?

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS

McCullough & Worthington (1995) claim that "forgiveness is a complex sentimental, cognitive and behavioral phenomenon in which the negative emotions and the judgment against the guilty person are reduced – not by blocking one's right to feel them – but by looking at the person in fault with *compassion, kindness and love*".

In this experience, as in similar ones Paleari & Tomelli (2008, p. 78)⁹, we can see that victims have been able not only to empathize with the offender, but also to reduce judgment towards the culprits, by forgiving and considering "the other" in his own fear and weakness (Nanetti, 2014, p. 116), without negative feel-

⁹ Interview published on Repubblica of the 28th of August 2007, released by Antonia Custra, daughter to carabinieri vice brigadier Antonio Custra killed by a terrorist in Milan in 1977, in which the woman tells the stages she went through to get to the forgiveness of her father's murderer. At first she hated him, in time she elaborated the mourning and when she met him she felt "emotion and embarrassment" and later she thought "how can I help him?", and she said "I tried to understand who the killers were and I was able to see them as victims".

ings (Barcaccia, Mancini, 2013, p. 77). Moreover, the victims have succeeded in looking at them with *compassion, kindness and love*, including probable murderers' sons in their own family's/friends' circle, transforming revenge into forgiveness and into a relationship of reciprocity, of love, dissolving any kind of "offense" that could one day recall revenge.

Therefore, in this sense, forgiveness is the result of a relationship between the victim and the offender, where the former—by forgiving—breaks free from his/her state as a victim disengaging himself/herself from the person that has made him/her "prisoner" and, at the same time, by breaking free, releases the latter as well, since, where there is no victim, there is no offender either.

In this sense, forgiveness permits the guilty person "to see himself in a new way, as a person worthy of forgiveness" (Barcaccia, Mancini, 2013, p. 77).

Thus, the victim becomes the leading person giving freedom to the guilty one, since he/she forgives giving of himself/herself, and by forgiving he/she "overcomes that dual plane on which opposites exist and generate conflict" (Lumera, 2015). As a result, the gift is not a simple exchange between individuals, but rather the possibility to reach the other, creating "an authentic relationship and conferring on it the specific characteristics of a deep human experience"(Cavalleri, 2007).

In this relationship, every time we relate with the other and recognize him/her, we create a connection with him/her and offer our recognition as a gift (Molinari, Cavalleri, 2015). Due to the reciprocal gift of recognition we recognize each other and build a mutual relationship, which does not involve being winners or losers, victims or offenders, but only people who fulfill themselves as dignity-holders. In this way forgiveness becomes a gift, a love relationship in which I identify the other for what he/she really is.

Forgiveness is an act that opens up the heart to "total and unconditional love" (Nannetti, 2015a, p. 243), where one seeks the other for their own sake, while "separation and blame" no

longer exist (Nannetti, 2014) but everyone “loves everything and everybody, the near and the distant, the friend and the enemy, what he/she owns and what he/she does not” (Nannetti, 2010) and “in this state of grace everyone lives in joy and abundancy” (Nannetti, 2015b, p. 245).

In these acts of forgiveness and welcoming it is possible to underline the same features of events I have just mentioned above: the leading men have forgiven and welcomed, freeing those who committed the crime.

Forgiveness does not delete either memory or justice, however it does make people “stronger than fear and violence”¹⁰.

Forgiveness is an inner element of the human heart, and it is essential, just as relationship and love are: in fact, as Hellinger claims, victim and culprit feel both “exposed and dependent on something higher that they do not understand; and they meet in the end as complete human beings, with deep respect and love” (Hellinger, 2016, p. 98). A reciprocal relationship is the very place where respect and love blend together.

As you can see from the testimony reported above, forgiveness was Simon and his sons’ free choice, and they gained a new life, a new beginning, by forgiving. By their choice, they set the murderers free from the penalty of a crime. This, legally speaking, remains just the same, but they have broken the shackles between oppressed and oppressor, in which usually victims, if they do not forgive, can remain entangled.

Lumera claims that with forgiveness you are freed from shackles because what we “see and sense from the outside, in people and things, is always our own projection, a part of ourselves” (Lumera, 2015, p. 143). He describes his theory of the “Sun’s point of view” as a revolution which is able to give us a more fulfilling vision of life. It is easy to see that conflict often starts

¹⁰ Message of the President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella, on the occasion of the Second Forgiveness Day organized by the Turin Sermig.

from a twisted vision of things. These dynamics can be applied to forgiveness.

If I do not consider myself as a victim, even if I am, but I manage to see the chance of a new – and maybe difficult – beginning, I must consider forgiveness as the only pathway to follow in order to arrive at this new beginning, for myself and for the others. In this way I can avoid conflict that could also lead to unknown and difficult consequences.

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