

## Book review

***Public forgiveness in post-conflict contexts*, Bas van Stokkom, Neelke Doorn and Paul van Tongeren. (2012). Cambridge, Intersentia Publishing Ltd. ISBN 978-1-78068-044-6**

*I was very touched watching TV just now . . .*

*There was a Serbian man from Kosovo, he is now in Belgrade. He spoke about what they did during the war. About burning the homes, about the Albanian people fleeing, about being there, about the terror. . . He said he did not have dirty hands. And he asked for forgiveness.*

*I was very touched. I had never thought that I would hear someone say these things, admitting these things, in the Serbian language. It was a documentary by a Kosovo journalist meeting this Serbian man. He would like to come back to Kosovo. It is the place where he was born.*

*'I was very touched, but I don't know if the people whose brothers, father, sons were murdered could forgive him. He spoke about rape too . . .'*

*'I haven't felt so emotional for a long time.'*

*E.S. (ethnic Albanian from Kosovo) – skype conversation with author, 12.12.2013*

In our 'modern' times, where human rights abuses continue to be a feature of daily life in many countries and part of the daily news in others, the question of how people can ultimately redress the legacies of massive human rights abuse is very pertinent. Part of the concept of transitional justice refers to strictly judicial and tangible measures involving criminal prosecutions and reparations programmes. However, the question remains how to address the less tangible components of the legacy of human rights abuses, namely the repair of social trust and the willingness to (re-)engage at local

population level with those who belong to the national or cultural group consisting of offenders. The latter is still a question of debate and a process that is poorly understood.

*Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Contexts* (2012), van Stokkom, Doorn and van Tongeren, brings together twelve scholarly papers first presented at a conference on the subject at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, in 2010. In their introduction, the editors present the main theoretical and practical perspectives, including the central idea that public forgiveness may enable human beings to liberate themselves from the prison of the past, and include two main approaches to the concept.

Of these, the minimalist 'reconciliation without forgiveness' approach claims that engagement to build trust is more important than forgiveness, while the maximalist 'no future without forgiveness' appears to take forgiveness as the starting point to rebuilding broken relationships. According to Bishop Desmond Tutu, this latter conception of public forgiveness is part of traditional African jurisprudence and does not mean condoning what has been done. Furthermore, it implies that it remains important to remember. The relatively successful public forgiveness in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committees (TRC), however, seems to sprout from conditions that may not be easily replicated in other contexts: a leader respected by both parties and internationally; a conflict that has ended with all parties, including the international community, rejecting the apartheid regime; an adversary party of which many members had also been against apartheid; and a common call for 'truth finding'.

Following the introduction, Part I, *Philosophical accounts of public forgiveness* provides the reader with a deeper theoretical and philosophical exposure of the main concepts, their relation to minimalist and maximalist approaches, and some points of critique or support to either approach. My personal interest was geared towards Eiskovits' chapter, in which he presents his view on specific conditions enabling or disabling sympathy and political reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. He points out that *'it is problematic to define a process of political reconciliation in terms of forgiveness, because forgiving is a very private business that cannot be promoted as a policy'*. It also resonates with the quote of E.S. that opens this review. However, Eiskovits' analysis, in which he compares West Bank Palestinians and Israeli colonists to inseparable Siamese twins, is mocking the highly unequal power relations between the two groups in a way I find less appealing. In my reading, this analysis is an illustration of Eiskovits' own point of view that the forgiving (and thus in my view also the scientific work towards understanding the concept) relates to those whose business it is to forgive. The second part of the book links the concept of public forgiveness to political and religious developments in other (post) conflict regions, such as Northern Ireland, South Africa, Iraq, El Salvador and Chile.

When invited to review this book, I had planned to ask a friend from Kosovo what he thought of public forgiveness. As it happened I did not need to ask; it was the documentary mentioned at the beginning of this review that sparked his reaction and question. In order to further explore that

question, empirical research with attention to the issues of economic development, social security and distributive justice, as suggested by the editors, will be necessary. Equally, while the Christian religion may seem particularly endowed towards forgiveness, many of the peoples suffering from human rights abuses, or its aftermath, may subscribe to other religious, spiritual or cultural approaches. It will be important to consider how these approaches, including different religions, may help, impede, or perhaps be irrelevant to rebuilding a social engagement between populations of (previously) opposing sides.

In bringing together this collection of papers, the editors of *'Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Contexts'* have offered a thought-provoking and question-raising reading experience. Qualitative research, adding the voice of people more directly involved, as well as cooperation with academic researchers of countries or societies contemplating questions of public forgiveness may help us to understand, and perhaps ultimately to help their societies to face the future with whatever approach is best for them: reconciliation, forgiveness, neither or both.

Special thanks to E.S. for his inspiring thoughts and the permission to quote his words.

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