



BOOK REVIEW

## Matthew Ichihashi Potts, *Forgiveness: An Alternative Account*

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Is forgiveness real? In Matthew Ichihashi Potts' new exploration of forgiveness, the answer is a qualified 'yes'. He begins with this problem: forgiveness seems too cheap, too easy; an inadequate response to the evils of contemporary life. After the 2015 mass shooting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, when some relatives of victims quickly and publicly forgave the white supremacist shooter, Ta-Nehisi Coates wondered, 'Is that real?' As Potts puts it, 'If forgiveness is real, then it's a real problem' (p. 2). Does forgiveness sabotage the pursuit of justice?

Potts skillfully defends forgiveness by redefining it. For Potts, forgiveness is not so much a means of resolving harm as it is a habit of patient, honest and sometimes angry endurance. Forgiveness is 'the commitment to forgo retaliation' (p. 21). Potts strenuously avoids any sense that forgiveness triumphantly resolves wrongdoing. Repentance is not a 'transactional element of a forgiving exchange', but rather a public mourning that allows a community to endure a difficult present (p. 75). Similarly, confession is not a currency that buys forgiveness. Rather, it is 'an endless, sleepless sorrow' (p. 120). 'There can be no compensating erasure of our pains' (p. 233), Potts insists again and again, and so forgiveness will not 'make final and fully redeeming sense of our losses' (p. 220). Instead, 'forgiving love bears an unsettling but undeniable resemblance to grief' (p. 200). Forgiveness does not heal; it abides.

Potts takes a literary approach to his topic. He engages various thinkers on forgiveness, including Jacques Derrida, Hannah Arendt, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Judith Butler, Julian of Norwich and many others. But these engagements do not provide the structure of his text. Instead, the book revolves around four novels and related theological loci: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Buried Giants*, on retaliation; Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, on repentance; Louise Erdrich's *LaRose*, on remission and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, on resurrection. In each case, Potts first introduces the novel and provides an account of its early plot, then engages with the key issues in relation to forgiveness that arise from the text by engaging other authors. He then concludes with an account of the climax and ending of the novel, and how they reframe the problems of forgiveness. These novels function like paradigm cases. They 'unearth [the] subtleties and relevance' of forgiveness and provide new angles on his thesis (p. 11). They do not challenge that thesis. He chooses this method because literary fiction 'so frequently and so beautifully presents the problems of forgiveness and because Christian moral and systematic theology so often fails to' (p. 15). Potts admits that he chose the texts because they are his favourites, but this is

no difficulty. They are well chosen, and his exposition is the most beautiful and compelling portion of his text.

Potts' main contribution here is his cautious reframing of forgiveness away from triumphalist, affective, penal and transactional accounts and towards forgiveness as 'a habit of grief and a practice of mourning' (p. 13). The effect of Potts' book is to whittle away aspects of forgiveness that do not accord with this more circumscribed approach. This is helpful insofar as it clarifies what forgiveness looks like under certain conditions, and insofar as one agrees with Potts' conceptual commitments. It is helpful, too, as a diagnosis of how forgiveness has gone wrong, and what it might look like in the wake of those failures.

The greatest strength of the text is not at the conceptual level, but at the level of narrative. Potts' exposition of the dynamics of forgiveness through the four novels yields his most fruitful insights into the difficult perseverance of forgiveness – and he accomplishes this in way that is accessible to those who haven't read these texts. His reading of *Gilead* as an incomplete and flawed confession not only reframes the novel, but also provides a winsome account of confession as a practice. His reading of the tragic child at the centre of *LaRose* insightfully grounds enemy-love on Jesus' love for our own enemies. These novels give deeply poignant texture to forgiveness.

Potts' circumscribed and conceptually clear approach to forgiveness is also his text's greatest weakness – though perhaps this judgement simply points to a difference in philosophical orientation. In any case, instead of a single abstract definition of forgiveness exemplified in fictional accounts that accord with it, why not posit an ordered diversity – a 'family resemblance' approach – in conversation with the messiness of practice? Why not a dialectical approach to forgiveness, which might emphasise *both* triumph and resolution *and* the non-retaliatory endurance of ineradicable loss? Why not begin with and return to ordinary practices of forgiveness? Aside from the very effective introductory example and a brief autobiographical note, I cannot recall the text reckoning with examples of real-life forgiveness. Since Potts' carefully circumscribed account of forgiveness is in tension with some of the varied linguistic fabric of forgiveness in everyday life, this omission seems significant.

These difficulties aside, Potts' text is an essential therapy for the way theologies of forgiveness have gone wrong in the modern West. It is a strict and beautiful chastening in a world where non-retaliation is more important than ever.

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