

## **IS FORGIVENESS REALLY HUMAN AND NOT DIVINE?**

By Nick Gier

To err is human, but to forgive is divine.

--Alexander Pope

George Bush has just released his list of presidential pardons, so perhaps some of you, as part of your new year's resolutions, have decided that you would also forgive those who have hurt you. One would think that religion would be a good guide for this process, but deeper reflection shows that it may not be.

The three most successful religions in world history have made forgiveness central to their message. Pure Land Buddhism, Japan's largest denomination, preaches that chanting the name of the Buddha with a sincere heart will cancel all karmic debt.

Hundreds of millions of Indians worship Lord Krishna primarily because he offers unconditional grace. Even the demons who tried to kill him are dispatched directly to heaven, without penance and no chance to reoffend.

Christianity spread widely throughout the Middle East mostly because it accepted anyone into its congregations, including slaves and women. (Its closest Roman competitor, the religion of Mithra, admitted only men.) Except for possibly one exception mentioned in Mark 3:29, Jesus offers unconditional forgiveness for all those who have sinned.

In earthly matters it is our judicial system that tries criminals and punishes them, but it is a chief executive who occasionally forgives by granting pardons. In Christian theology it is God who both judges us and then forgives all those who turn to him. But if God knows the future, as Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe, philosopher Anne Minas contends that we have a divine "practical joker, assigning punishments which he, with perfect knowledge, knows he is going to remit."

When presidents pardon a criminal, it is presumably because they determine that the sentence was based on incorrect or incomplete facts. President Bush was forced to reconsider his pardon of New York developer Isaac Toussie because of the discovery of new facts, among them the \$40,000 his father had given to GOP candidates. There are, however, no new facts in God's perfect knowledge. God cannot err, but God cannot forgive either, at least in this sense.

Chief executives can also decide that the sentence given was too harsh, or that the criminal has shown good progress towards rehabilitation. Governor George Bush was widely condemned for making light of Karla Fae Tucker's prison ministry and refusing to commute her death sentence. God would have always known about Tucker's rehabilitation, and God should be the consummate compassionate conservative.

Divine forgiveness might be giving up resentment towards those who have offended against God. But, in addition to knowing the future, Jews, Christians, and Muslims hold that God is immutable, meaning that God never changes. Giving up resentment involves a change in one's feelings towards another, so God cannot forgive in this sense either.

Christian theologians have founded the doctrine of divine immutability essentially on one verse (James 1:17), and they did this, ill advisedly, with the most dynamic deity in the history of religion. Jehovah repeatedly intervenes in history and repents of his actions at least 33 times. In the Incarnation God undergoes the most radical change conceivable: becoming fully human in the Christ Child.

Giving up resentment is the key to human forgiveness, according to Katherine Piderman, staff chaplain at the Mayo Clinic. Piderman states that "forgiveness is the act of untying yourself from thoughts and feelings that bind you to the offense committed against you. This can reduce the power these feelings otherwise have over you, so that you can live a freer and happier life in the present."

Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that you forget the offense or now condone it. The act still stands as it was committed in the past, and only the offender is responsible for the wrong that it still is. You have no power to change that person, but you do have the capacity to let the anger go. Resentment burns holes in your heart while the offender's heart may remain completely hard.

Piderman puts it this way: "When we're unforgiving, it's we who pay the price over and over. We may bring our anger and bitterness into every relationship and new experience. Our lives may be so wrapped up in the wrong that we can't enjoy the present."

Piderman does not promise that forgiveness will lead to reconciliation but, under ideal circumstances, it can "lead to feelings of understanding, empathy, and compassion for the one who hurt you." Most important, however, is the fact that "forgiveness takes away the power the other person continues to wield in your life."

Some readers may be offended by what they perceive is an attack on their religious beliefs, specifically the basic idea of a forgiving God. It is Christian theology, not I, that has given us these ideas of a divine being who knows the future and who cannot change.

As a young student searching for answers to religious questions, I chose to attend the Claremont School of Theology, the world center for the study of "process" theology. There they teach that God changes as the world changes; that a compassionate God fully experiences everything that happens; and that God knows the future as we come to know to it, certainly more fully and completely, but definitely not before it happens.

The early church was emphatic in its condemnation of the idea that God suffered during the Crucifixion. The heresy was called patripassianism, literally "God suffering." According to the church fathers, it is only the Jesus human who

suffered, which leaves the idea of divine compassion and even redemption of sins utterly without meaning.

Today denying change and future knowledge to God are still considered heresies by the stubborn keepers of orthodox belief, but if traditional ideas about God make the idea of divine forgiveness unintelligible, even absurd, then perhaps a little heresy might be a really good thing.

Until Christian theologians get the divine attributes right, Alexander Pope was wrong to say that "to err is human, but to forgive is divine."

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Piderman's article can be found at [www.mayoclinic.com/health/forgiveness/MH00131](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/forgiveness/MH00131). Read more about a changing deity at [www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/process.htm](http://www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/process.htm).