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978-0-521-87880-7 - Forgiveness and Christian Ethics  
Anthony Bash  
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## FORGIVENESS AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

What does it mean to forgive? The answer is widely assumed to be self-evident but critical analysis quickly reveals the complexities of the subject. Forgiveness has traditionally been the preserve of Christian theology, though in the last half century – and at an accelerating pace – psychologists, lawyers, politicians and moral philosophers have all been making an important contribution to questions about and our understanding of the subject. Anthony Bash offers a vigorous restatement of the Christian view of forgiveness in critical dialogue with those both within and without the Christian tradition. Forgiveness is a much more complicated subject than many theologians recognise. Bash explores the relevance of the theoretical discussion of the topic to recent events such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, post-Holocaust trials, the aftermath of 9/11 and 7 July and various high-profile criminal cases.

ANTHONY BASH is Rector of the Durham North Team of parishes and Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University. He is author of *Ambassadors for Christ* (1997) and a number of articles.

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Christian ethics has increasingly assumed a central place within academic theology. At the same time the growing power and ambiguity of modern science and the rising dissatisfaction within the social sciences about claims to value-neutrality have prompted renewed interest in ethics within the secular academic world. There is, therefore, a need for studies in Christian ethics which, as well as being concerned with the relevance of Christian ethics to the present-day secular debate, are well informed about parallel discussions in recent philosophy, science or social science. *New Studies in Christian Ethics* aims to provide books that do this at the highest intellectual level and demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance or in terms of underlying moral justifications.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo  
Cambridge University Press  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK  
Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521878807](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521878807)

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First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-0-521-87880-7 hardback

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## *General editor's preface*

This book makes a timely contribution to the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. It provides a nuanced and well-written account of forgiveness that takes fully into consideration a wide range of scholarly material in philosophy, psychology, law (Anthony Bash originally trained in law and practised as a solicitor before ordination), New Testament studies and theology. It makes important links with other books in the series, especially David Hollenbach's *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* and Jean Porter's *Moral Action and Christian Ethics*. And it fulfils well the two key aims of the series as a whole – namely, to promote monographs in Christian ethics that engage centrally with the present secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level and, second, to encourage contributors to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate.

The issue of forgiveness is certainly timely, as Anthony Bash demonstrates through the many examples that he takes, such as the process of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa, post-Holocaust trials, the aftermath of 9/11 and 7 July, and various high-profile crime stories. He also shows that the virtue of forgiveness is much more complicated than is often realised either in society at large or specifically in churches. Pointing to philosophical, psychological and legal discussions of forgiveness he argues that in comparison many theological accounts of forgiveness are inadequate. Indeed, very few other recent theologians have shown a proper awareness of these detailed secular discussions of forgiveness.

Anthony Bash argues that forgiveness properly understood is a process, as psychological studies have suggested. He also sides with those philosophers who maintain that there are occasions when unconditional forgiveness is actually inappropriate, for example when the victim is dead or where forgiveness conflicts with justice. He concludes that, theologically, forgiveness is properly seen as a gift rather than as a moral duty. We do have such a

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duty, but it in turn is best seen as a duty to *strive* to forgive – believing, on theological grounds, that it is finally God who forgives unconditionally.

Readers of this thoughtful book are likely to come away more (deeply) confused about forgiveness than before. Theologically inclined readers may, I hope, be persuaded that secular accounts of forgiveness do need to be taken seriously. Others may be challenged by the book's theological foundations – forgiveness is an eminently theological virtue. This is indeed a challenging book.

ROBIN GILL

## A NOTE ON THE COVER IMAGE: THE ESSA CROSS

Towards the end of the last century Gert Swart was commissioned to make a cross for the Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa (ESSA), a multi-cultural seminary drawing students from many countries in Africa. ESSA's campus, a small but significant example of urban renewal, is situated in the South African city of Pietermaritzburg, the capital of KwaZulu-Natal.

The complex symbolism of the cross was carefully selected to convey several messages including the suffering of many South Africans in the turbulent, violent years before the birth of our democracy, the suffering of countless others in what must be one of the bloodiest centuries in the history of the world, and, crucially, one of redemption, reconciliation and hope.

Gert used images of his hands, each with a finger on the trigger of a gun directed at the Lamb, to contextualise the cross – in a province known as the 'killing fields of Natal' in the 1980s – and as a comment on the complicity of each one of us in the brutal execution of Christ on the cross.

As people gathered to dedicate the cross on 11 September 2001 news was filtering through of the audacious and devastating attacks on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon. So it was that, while the USA reeled, a small assembly intimately acquainted with terror and tragedy exuberantly celebrated the arrival of the ESSA Cross, a beacon of hope on a dark day in a dark world.

GERT AND ISTINE SWART

## *Preface*

This book is about forgiveness.

The subject is no longer the preserve of only those within the Christian tradition. People within the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, law and politics, for example, are also talking and writing about forgiveness.

Most weeks there is something in the popular press that is germane to the topic of this book. It is rare that an academic book can engage with popular culture in this way without becoming journalistic.

The Christian tradition has a significant, coherent and sometimes critical contribution to make to academic and popular discourse on forgiveness. As this book will show, modern discussion about and reflection on forgiveness are impoverished without the contribution of Christian thinking. The fact that society may be 'post-modern' and 'post-Christian' does not mean that the Christian tradition has nothing to say about forgiveness. There remains a distinctive and important place for the Christian voice on the subject.

Modern discourse also has a contribution to make to Christian thinking. It forces theologians to rethink the content and forms of their categories of thought and to restate them for a modern audience that asks modern questions. It is urgent that theologians do that, if they are to engage coherently with the sorts of wrongdoing that have taken place in the last hundred years – wrongdoing that is probably unparalleled as to both its extent and its depravity. Modern thinking also has the incidental effect of highlighting what is distinctive in the Christian tradition and enables Christians to contribute better to the current debates.

Less obviously, forgiveness is also a relatively neglected topic in scholarly Christian writing. There have not been many books directly on the subject in recent years, yet forgiveness is rightly regarded as one of the central themes of the Christian gospel. This book seeks to help restore the omission and to further debate and discussion on forgiveness.

Books often have their genesis in the personal interests of their writers. My interest in this subject does not arise because I have been wronged in a



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particularly evil way. I have faced the normal ‘ups and downs’ of life and, like most people, have learned something about forgiveness pragmatically. I became interested in the topic as the subject of academic study in the summer of 2003 when, jointly with my wife, Dr Melanie Bash, I wrote a chapter of *Forgiveness in Context* (Watts and Gulliford 2004: 29–49). I became aware then of how much work remains to be done on this subject, and I also became aware of how deeply the topic was touching me personally. I may not have been carrying a particularly heavy burden of unforgiveness, but I began to realise then that I had been – and continued to be – unforgiving about some things. I have, since then, made some progress in this area; more progress has yet to be made.

I have been surprised, as I have talked to people about the contents of this book, how much they have wanted to disclose their own stories to do with unforgiveness, hurt and suffering. I suspect this book is timely to help people think in a measured way about forgiveness, to explore some of the complexities and issues that forgiveness raises and to learn to forgive responsibly.

I would like to thank a delightful conversation partner, Dr Geoffrey Scarre of the Department of Philosophy at Durham University, for the contribution he has made to help me formulate and hone my thinking about forgiveness. His gentle and measured approach and his sharp insights have been an unfailing source of stimulus.

To my friends and family who have read portions of this book as it was being written I would like to give thanks. Dr Joe Bouch has been, for over twenty years, a critical and loyal friend. I owe him an enormous debt of gratitude. Thanks are due also to Alan Brown, Professor Gyles Glover, Professor Peter Rhodes, Rowena Abadi, Dr George Boyes-Stones and the Reverend Dale Hanson who have read, offered advice or talked to me about portions of this book. I thank my father who, in his ninetieth year, has critically and carefully read the entire manuscript of this book. I am also grateful to Dr Stephen Cherry for reading a draft of this book and for his generous and insightful comments.

My thanks go to Professor Robin Gill, the editor of the series in which this book appears, and to an unnamed reader of an earlier draft of the book. I am grateful to them both for their comments and suggestions.

I wrote most of this book while I was Solway Fellow and Chaplain at University College, Durham. I am grateful to the College for the opportunity to engage in research and to explore some of the ideas contained in this book through conversations with students and academic staff and in the College chapel.

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My three children, Hannah, Simeon and Matthias, have been surprised that I should have spent so long reflecting on forgiveness, a topic that seems to them self-evident in its scope, meaning and value. For them, the subject has been adequately explored in books such as *The Grumpy Day: Teddy Horsley Learns about Forgiveness*, one of a delightful series by L. J. Francis and N. M. Slee (Birmingham: Christian Education Publications, 1994). Another book on forgiveness (and one without pictures) is, in their view, unnecessary. They have also been quick to remind me to forgive, especially where they have been concerned. I hope that with the completion of this book they will find me less often at my desk in front of a computer screen.

The children have given my wife, Melanie, and me great joy, and brought many opportunities, within the context of happy family life, to forgive and to be forgiven. I dedicate this book to Melanie – my best friend and most loyal critic – and to our children, Hannah, Simeon and Matthias. It comes with much love and with many thanks to each of them.