Forgiveness and Reconciliation

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Rationale of the Seminar

Lived life is always shared life in which conflicts arise and interests collide. To resolve manifest and deep conflicts and to work to correct past failures is crucial for the flourishing of life. How can people, institutions, large populations, and whole nations have a fresh start in the midst of the burdens of the past? How can I -- living in a world of painful memories, atrocities, and many wounds -- be enhanced, that is to say, be opened up to pragmatic and peaceful cooperation or even to mutual trust, understanding, and support? One key strategy, or life-enhancing technique, is forgiveness. The processes of pardoning, of forgiving, and of reconciling are closely linked. The semantic field also includes mercy and peace. All these terms have a rich tradition in both religious and philosophical reflection. At the same time, the cultural alternative to forgiving is always also present: revenge is still today for both individual as well as social agents a powerful motivation for action. As can be shown in the long (and also artistic) tradition of dealing with the trope of the ‘dies irae’, the search for justice can come close to ideas of divine revenge. The religious imagination regarding the day of judgment might be in need of deep revisions in order to conceive the Christian religion as a religion of grace and forgiveness. So the idea and the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation as a technique of enhancing life is deeply connected with the grammar of Christian life and thought as well as social life in the 21st century.

The seminar is designed as a master seminar moving between a variety of sub topics. Depending on the type of seminar, the weekly readings can vary between 20 and 50 pages. The first of 14 sessions will offer a general introduction, and the last one will ask students to write a review.

1. Biblical orientation I: “… you shall love you neighbor as yourself…” (Lev 19,18)


2. Biblical Orientation II: Forgiving and the Lord’s Prayer (Matth 6, 9b-13)

3. Philosophical differentiations

4. Reconciliation and forgiveness as a social acts

5. Forgiveness in action theory: Hannah Arendt

6. Reconciliation and forgiveness on the level of individual or social agents?

7. Forgiveness inside of transitional states

8. Forgiveness and a psychology/philosophy of well-being
9. Revenge as an alternative to forgiveness


10. Relation between the moral act of forgiving and the legal justice and punishment


11. Dies irae – imagination in theology and art


plus examples from music

12. Current philosophical debate