

## Philosophy in Review



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

Peter Admirand 

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**Matthew Ichihashi Potts.** *Forgiveness: An Alternative Account.* Yale University Press 2022. 228 pp. \$30.00 USD (Hardcover 9780300259858).

As I was about to begin this review, my eight-year-old daughter walked into the kitchen. I didn't say, 'Good morning, cutie,' but muttered: 'I need to get work done, so please don't talk to me'. As a flimsy excuse, can I mention she is the posterchild of a chatterbox? However, as I write, she is eating cereal and humming, and I feel guilty. My wife says a child should never eat alone. Though eating alone in a house of seven can seem a luxury, an urge immediately arises to say 'sorry' and to ask for forgiveness (I also want her to leave, compounding the mixed feelings). Every day, for reasons banal (and sometimes) more alarming, we cause, seek, or desire some gesture or words of forgiveness. From failing to smile and welcome a cheery daughter to all the horrors inflicted in our world, forgiveness is a timeless, convoluted, but integral aspect of moral life and, to some extent, ongoing human survival.

Turning to four acclaimed, complicated, and generally lachrymose novels, Matthew Ichihashi Potts aims to write 'theology in the margins of literary texts' (11). While Potts seeks to 'offer a modest theological defense of forgiveness' (6), he ultimately wants to expose the failures and moral frailties of loading forgiveness with too many guarantees or promises. His forgiveness is where edges, painful gaps, and acute silences co-exist even amidst the possibility of some healing or renewal. Forgiveness is intertwined with mourning and a wounded love; in his words, it is a 'self-reflexive and nonretaliatory ethical posture that begins and ends in failure, that it is a practice of mourning that reckons rather than redeems past wrong' (180). One of Potts' key starting points is to correct a general misreading of Joseph Butler's reading of forgiveness as only forswearing revenge when Butler acknowledges legitimate remnants of anger and bitterness. For Potts, forgiveness is not some elixir which fully rights all past wrongs.

Examining these novels through thinkers like Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Charles Griswold, Martha Nussbaum, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Nietzsche, and Miroslav Volf, Potts layers, illuminates, and unpacks multiple meanings of forgiveness through interweaving philosophical, literary, and theological themes. His interdisciplinary approach rewards readers of various fields.

The book is divided into two parts, 'Accountability' and 'Atonement,' each consisting of two chapters. The first chapter, 'Retaliation,' focuses on Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*. Chapter Two, 'Repentance,' turns to Marilyn Robinson's *Gilead*, while chapter Three, 'Remission,' analyzes Louise Erdrich's *LaRose*. The fourth chapter, 'Resurrection,' probes Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. I had read *Beloved* and *Gilead*, never read Erdrich, and read other novels by Ishiguro. Some familiarity helps, but Potts carefully reconstructs the key plots, characters, and provides numerous (but not tiresome) reminders so readers can stay with his arguments, especially after sections that veer away from the novels and into explicitly philosophical and theological material.



The book's structure itself is lucid and elegant. In the voluminous literature on forgiveness, a few key strands are worth highlighting. One is the relationship of forgiveness and justice. Does forgiveness remove the role of justice (and punishment)? Can there be forgiveness and justice? In naming part one, 'Accountability,' Potts works through how and whether forgiveness should lead to or renounce accountability. He is rightly concerned that a call to forgive often re-burdens the victim and is too often a 'salve to the conscience of power than an instrument of victims' healing' (2). Potts' approach to violence is rightly a victim-centred one—and yet, the victim (better survivor, best, fellow human being) is also a part of a community linked by the past, present, and future. Retaliation may suckle the wrath of a victim, but at what cost to the common good and future if it only produces more violence? And yet, justice has its place in moral life. The crimes of Mao, Stalin, or Pol Pot and their many bureaucratic, political, and military functionaries cannot be passed in silence. It demands a response that restores (as much as possible) the dignity, value, and (where possible) lives of the victims, promoting ongoing peace and denouncing crimes against humanity. Too often, though, justice is decreed by the powerful and reinforces the status quo ante, even if such a state was riddled and compromised by colonial and racist foundations. Such is especially the case in the role of slavery in the United States, as seen in both Robinson's and Morrison's novels and the impact and legacy of the US genocide and mistreatment of Native Americans in *LaRose*. While *The Buried Giant* is mythological, its themes of violence, forgetting, and retaliation enable it to be applied widely, not just within its setting of Arthurian England.

A second key issue is the relationship of forgiveness with remembering and forgetting. A surfeit of either remembering or forgetting too much or too little is unlikely to lead to a stable, holistic forgiveness. If forgetting or not remembering can seem like a betrayal (especially if someone is not the victim), how is the memory of horror or injustice upheld without leading to rancour and retaliation? Must, then, forgiveness lead to repentance for healing? Here again, Potts is careful to avoid placing an inordinate weight on victims. He wants to maintain the role of the victim's lament, and so justifies ongoing grief and anger. 'Forgiveness is not reconciliation,' he writes (8). While he adds such (unlikely) reconciling 'replaces Christ's work with our own' (9), I would add two caveats: 1) There have, indeed, been such seemingly miraculous examples of repentance and reconciliation (and many without any explicit, or for some actors, implicit Christological role); and 2) Some horrors and crimes simply resist reconciliation, where such can seem inhuman. Here, we also slip into the problem of theodicy (not a word used by Potts in the book) but implied in his turning to Miroslav Volf's arguments that forgiveness is possible, even in the contexts of horrors like the Balkan Wars of the 1990s if we cede justice (retaliation) to God, and Volf's notion that in heaven, victims of horrible crimes will be healed in such a way where the horrors will not be forgotten, but also not come to mind. There is a reason peace activists say it takes a few generations for communities to start healing after ongoing violence. Who could imagine that someone could become best friends again with a neighbour who committed atrocities against loved ones? There are reasons communities remain distrustful, whether today in Rwanda or in Volf's Balkans, even as some individuals, for pragmatic or moral reasons, seek some renewed connection now.

In seeing forgiveness as remission or resurrection, Potts wants to highlight how love is integral

to forgiveness, but a love that is wounded and deeply attuned to the loss that remains. He is particularly critical of the standard Christian atonement theories that imply Jesus had to die because a vengeful God required sacrifice. Instead, the love of God for humanity is the driving force of Christ's being and life (165). In *LaRose*, such an act involves one family after a father accidentally kills another family's child, giving that family his only son. While the pain and loss remain, and in some ways, are never really forgiven, the act (eventually) breaks the cycle of intergenerational violence. The given child cannot replace the one lost but stymies (to an extent) the urge for retaliatory violence. In perhaps the only misstep in the book, though, Potts' chapter on *LaRose* unduly focuses on the theology of Millbank and Von Balthasar (and von Speyr) even as (unsurprisingly) he finds holes in their overly rigid and Christological arguments (217). He would have been far better served turning to indigenous theological views of forgiveness or memoirs and witness testimonies that grapple with these issues in light of genocide (he does include a partial list on 246fn61).

While Potts proves he can read and analyze dense thinkers, too often, the so-called experts pale in clarity and conviction to Potts' own readings. Instead, he trudges through texts replete with jargon or (seemingly vacuous) rhetorical flourishes and repeatedly says, "in other words." However, as the convoluted styles of a Derrida or Foucault are so jarring compared to the author's sharp insights, I question the value of always turning to such thinkers if the gain can seem limited. Colleagues may find such a statement unforgivable, but I often find the weakest parts of many books are precisely those sections where a turn to some complex theories adds little. The fault probably lies with me or the one analyzing the text (but might it also lie in those renowned thinkers' verbosity and opaque prose?)

Potts' reading of *Beloved* raised many new insights for me, especially regarding who Beloved may have been and the tragic reinscribing of violence by one victim against another because of genocidal and colonialist structures and trauma. His reflection on seeing resurrection always with an eye on the empty tomb (211) is noteworthy, as is seeing Jesus as the crux for why I do not harm an enemy (not as a substitute for their sin, 176).

Despite its often-Christological focus, the book describes a more secular form of forgiveness, which could be an interesting bridge and discussion piece among the theist and nontheist readers of these four novels. While I agreed with Potts' warning to avoid linking forgiveness with what I would call theological triumphalism, I was left wondering how forgiveness as mourning can heal the millions of victims through atrocities and torture and whether this more realistic picture of forgiveness provides a viable hope or points to the impossibility of any lasting healing, not only in this world but in the believer's glance to the heavens?

Meanwhile, the review is finished. My daughter is upstairs somewhere, happy enough (we need to leave now for a family engagement). Was my shooing her away justified? She may not recognize my words as wrong, but I do. The morning, or in Pott's terms, mourning, may not be quite over. What else will I say or do in need of forgiveness for the rest of the day, by the time this is published, or when you read it? And what about you, too? How much will we seek forgiveness, and what is the best way to name and face this loss as loss? And while there is a time for mourning, shouldn't we still desire and deserve so much more? Or is that precisely the problem? We may deserve more, but

that is not what life gives most of us.

**Peter Admirand**, Dublin City University