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Forgiving your neighbour

A comparative reading of Matthew 6:12 and Surah 3:134

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GLOBALISATION, MIGRATION and the growing presence of Muslims in western contexts shaped by the Judeo-Christian tradition have brought Christian-Muslim relations to the forefront of theological debates. There is a need to explore the beliefs, questions and critique of Islam in order to gain a fresh appreciation of our own Christian self-understanding and at the same time to find new ways in articulating it for a Muslim audience. Although extensive research on the concept of forgiveness in human relationships has been carried out in the social sciences, a comparative reading of the texts in which the two protagonists of Christianity and Islam deal with the topic seems to be an uncharted territory. Various attempts have been made to harmonise the teachings of Jesus and Muhammad. From a Christian perspective a scholar concludes:

If Christians and Muslims are truly committed and submit themselves to the way of God then it behoves them to tread the path of forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus sum-

marized this when he said 'Forgive, and you shall be forgiven' (Lk 6.37). Likewise it would be true to say 'reconcile and you shall be reconciled' because in the end the call is 'to be reconciled to God' (2 Cor 5.18) which is the essence of both the Christian and the Muslim tradition.¹

And seen from a Muslim viewpoint an expert in Islamic studies refers to an occasion on which Muhammad was almost stoned to death:

According to Islamic sources, an angel came to him and said, 'Your Lord asks you that if you want He will destroy all of them by throwing these mountains over their city.' But the Prophet said, 'My Lord, forgive them. They don't know what

1 Sigvard von Sicard, 'Forgiveness and Reconciliation Through the Lenses of the Bible and the Qur'an', in *World Christianity in Muslim Encounter: Essays in Memory of David A. Kerr Volume 2*, ed. Stephen R. Goodwin (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), 39.

they are doing... Here, the Prophet echoes what Jesus said about his persecutors, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'.²

Did Muhammad essentially share his views on human forgiveness with Christ? In other words, did they pass on the same message? How do Jesus' teaching and Muhammad's instruction on it relate to each other? This article explores the theme of forgiveness in human relationships in the Sermon on the Mount and Surah 3—two sermons whose purpose is the formation of a new community in view of other religions. Based on a literary approach, this essay is primarily concerned with the exploration of the texts in their respective faith traditions rather than with their genesis and development. It will first discuss Jesus' and Muhammad's view of human forgiveness. The second part is devoted to bringing to the surface similarities and contrasts between the two visions. A third section will work out a few selected contemporary reflections on human forgiveness both in Christianity and Islam.

I Human Forgiveness

1. In Matthew 6

The Sermon on the Mount has been called a manifesto of a 'Christian counter-culture'.³ Jesus' description of the

new community in the kingdom of God was in marked contrast to the pagan nations on the one hand and to the (Jewish) scribes and Pharisees on the other. The pagans differ from the hypocrites in that the pagans are outsiders whereas the hypocrites are insiders. In Matthew 6:1-18 Jesus offers cultic instruction regarding the three most important acts of worship in the Jewish tradition: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. His main concern is the righteousness of people (Mt 6:1) and its relation to religious activities.

The section in Matthew 6:5-15 is about prayer and forgiveness. The Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6:9b-13) as a very old liturgy stands in the centre not only of the teaching on worship but of the Sermon on the Mount as a whole. It provides a model that his followers should copy. The prayer consists of three parts: the invocation, two sets of three petitions, and a doxology. The first set of petitions concerns the desires of God, whereas the second set pertains to human needs. The *fifth petition* (Mt 6:12) deals with the subject of forgiveness: 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.'⁴

Immediately after the Lord's Prayer the evangelist offers a theological assessment of this petition, a rule of religious law concerning the forgiveness of sins (Mt 6:14-15): 'For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.'

2 Zeki Saritoprak, 'Reconciliation: An Islamic Theological Approach', in *Reconciliation in Interfaith Perspective: Jewish, Christian and Muslim voices*, ed. R. Bieringer and D. J. Bolton (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 85.

3 John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian counter-*

culture (Leicestershire; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 19.

4 Quotations from the Bible are taken from the English Standard Version.

In the gospel of Matthew the Greek terminology used to describe the concept of human forgiveness relates to *aphiēmi* and its cognates. We find the verb *aphiēmi* 12 times⁵ and the noun *aphēsis* once.⁶ Originally, this word connotes the idea of 'to send off', literally and figuratively, in its broadest sense from 'to hurl' to 'to release'. Both the verb and the rarer noun are used in the legal sense of 'release' from office, marriage, obligation etc., also from debt or punishment, though never in a religious way.⁷

In the Septuagint it rarely denoted the concept of the forgiveness of sins. Nonetheless, the literature of Hellenistic Judaism suggests that *aphiēmi* is closely connected with the idea of God out of his mercy forgiving sin. Josephus uses *aphēsis* to describe human forgiveness in Bell, 1, 481, but mostly release.⁸ In the New Testament the verb occurs 146 times, out of which 45 times it carries the meaning of *cancel, forgive, remit* (of sin or debts).⁹ Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida classify it as a subdomain of reconciliation and forgiveness. This semantic field contains meanings that are opposed to hostility and strife. For them the stress in the meaning of *aphiēmi*

is upon the guilt of the wrongdoer and not upon the wrongdoing itself. The event of wrongdoing is not undone, but the guilt resulting from such an event is pardoned. To forgive, therefore, means essentially to remove the guilt resulting from wrongdoing.¹⁰

In the fifth petition the language of *aphiēmi* in connection with *opheilēma* is taken from business and law. It is used as a metaphor for the religious topic of sins and forgiveness of sins. Accordingly, sins are described as obligations human beings owe to God and to other people rather than as violations of taboos or transgressions of legal codes.¹¹ To forgive basically means to restore a relationship between two parties that is broken by obligations outstanding and not met. The direct correlation between divine and human forgiveness as well as the connection between prayer and the forgiveness of others are worth noting. In his commentary on Mt 6:12 Hans D. Betz notes:

The fact that an appeal is made means that as petitioners we are unable to come to terms with our indebtedness by ourselves...If vs 12a presents an appeal for what we cannot accomplish by ourselves, vs 12b states as a fact that we do (and

5 Mt 6:12,14-15; 9:2,5-6; 12:31-32; 18:21,27,32,35.

6 Mt 26:28.

7 Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geofrey W. Bromiley eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 509.

8 Kittel, *TDNT*, 510.

9 Barclay M. Jr. Newman, *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993).

10 Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996).

11 Hans Dieter Betz and Adela Y. Collins, *The Sermon on the Mount: A commentary on the Sermon on the mount, including the Sermon on the plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)*, Hermeneia—a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 403.

must do) what we are able to do.¹²

This is explained further in the parable Jesus told in answer to Peter's question concerning how often he should forgive his 'brother' (Mt 18:23-35). He gets the following message across (Mt 18:33-35):

'And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

Jesus is clearly demanding that his followers should forgive others. It is a Christian ethical imperative. However, it would be wrong to presuppose a claim for God's forgiveness by simply forgiving our debtors. This would amount to a kind of works righteousness. In light of the parable of the Unforgiving Servant the generous gift of God's forgiveness always precedes the call for human ethical behaviour. Therefore, the person who has received grace from God (*gratia praeviens*) will in gratitude for it extend forgiveness to others who may offend him (consequential action). Someone who does not grant forgiveness to others treats God's enormous forgiveness with contempt and does not deserve it.

Jesus' demand to not take revenge on someone who wrongs us (Mt 5:39) should not be taken to mean the abolition of the *lex talionis*. He clearly upheld this principle of justice (Mt 7:1). What Jesus had in mind was the realm of personal relationships. His followers were

called to have an attitude towards evil-doers which is based on love, not justice, which renounces personal revenge and leaves justice in the hands of God and God-ordained institution, which is motivated by the determination to seek someone's highest good and never by the desire to cause him harm.

2. In Surah 3

In contrast to the Meccan Surahs, the Medinan Surahs have not yet been studied extensively with regard to form and content. Their exact chronology represents another field of research. In summary, their main themes relate to detailed legal decisions, the debate with Jews and Christians, and military campaigns. According to Muslim tradition *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān* (Surah 3) was revealed in Medina during 624 and 625. Surah 3:123 seems to allude to the victory at Badr, whereas 3:155-174 to the setback at Uhud. Neal Robinson has argued that in its present form Surah 3 'constitutes a single multi-faceted response to the threat of apostasy that menaced the Muslim community after the debacle at Uhud'.¹³ It therefore reflects the formation of an Islamic community in dispute with Jewish and Christian communities.

The following passage in 130-136 connects the forgiveness from God with the pardon of men. Some scholars suggest that Muhammad received the revelation of these verses late in his life because it introduces the prohibition on charging interest (cf. 2:275 ff.; 30:39; 4:161).

¹² Betz and Collins, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 403.

¹³ Neal Robinson, 'Sūrat Āl 'Imrān and Those with the Greatest Claim to Abraham', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 6, no.2 (October 2004): 1.

130 O ye who believe! Devour not usury, doubled and multiplied; but fear God that ye may (really) prosper. 131 Fear the Fire, which is prepared for those who reject Faith: 132 And obey God and the Messenger; that ye may obtain mercy. 133 Be quick in the race for forgiveness from your Lord, and for a Garden whose width is that (of the whole) of the heavens and of the earth, prepared for the righteous, 134 those who spend (freely), whether in prosperity or in adversity, who restrain anger, and pardon (all) men—for God loves those who do good, 135 and those who, having done something to be ashamed of, or wronged their own souls, earnestly bring God to mind, and ask for forgiveness for their sins—and who can forgive sins except God? and are never obstinate in persisting knowingly in (the wrong) they have done. 136 For such the reward is forgiveness from their Lord, and Gardens with rivers flowing underneath, an eternal dwelling: How excellent a recompense for those who work (and strive)!¹⁴

In the Qur'ān the Arabic root *qafara* / *yaqfiru* to forgive, to grant pardon is by far the most important. Etymologically, the word has the meaning of 'to cover, to veil, to conceal'. Covering someone's sin is the unique prerogative of God (3:135). He alone grants *maḡfira*, forgiveness (3:133 and 136). *Ḡafūr* and *jaḡffār*, very forgiving, are two

of his names. Humankind, on the other hand, is invited to ask God's pardon for its sins (3:135). Only Muhammad may invoke forgiveness for others.¹⁵ In order to receive God's forgiveness, man has to meet certain conditions, e.g. repentance, faith, fear of Allah, obedience to Muhammad, good deeds, etc. Nevertheless, the phrase, 'He forgives whom He wills and punishes whom He wills' (thus without condition out of his power) occurs no less than seven times in the Qur'ān (3:129).¹⁶ Taken together, these verses suggest that the Qur'ān depicts an ambivalent idea about God's forgiveness.

Another term that describes the concept of forgiveness is the verb *ṣafaha* / *yaṣfahu*, which means 'to turn oneself away from people (so as to overlook their misdeeds)'.¹⁷ It is often used in view of God's judgment, e.g. Surah 15:85 'And the Hour is surely coming, so overlook (any human faults) with gracious forgiveness.'¹⁸ It seems that the required action has to do with exercising restraint in overlooking human faults, considering God's final decision, rather than extending real forgiveness. This will suffice to illustrate the point since the root does not occur in Surah 3.

The third root that denotes human forgiveness is 'afā / ya'fū which literally means 'to efface, to erase'. The word is used for the blowing wind in the desert that effaces all footprints. In the Qur'ān it appears only in the sense of 'to forget (about people's misdeeds),

¹⁴ References are to the standard Egyptian edition. Verses from the Qur'ān that have been translated into English are taken from Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The meaning of the Holy Qur'ān* (11th ed., Beltsville: Amana Pub., 2011).

¹⁵ Q 4:64.

¹⁶ Q 2:284; 5:18,40; 17:45; 29:21; 48:14.

¹⁷ Arne A. Ambros, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004).

¹⁸ Q 2:109; 5:13; 24:22; 43:89; 64:14.

to grant pardon, to waive one's right',¹⁹ e.g. whoever is absolved of some (of the penalty) by his brother.²⁰ Forms that are derived from this root occur 35 times in the Qur'ān and describe both divine and human action, e.g. God is much forgiving and ready to forgive.²¹

In 3:134 we find *'aḥīn* as the plural of the active participle *'aḥī* one who forgives, meaning 'those who pardon the offences of people'.²² This word appears in an enumeration of good deeds. Toshihiko Isutzu attributes it to the semantic field of good and bad. According to him 'to do good' which occurs in 3:134 as the generic term for righteous people represents one of the key ethical terms in the Qur'ān: 'In the actual Qur'ānic usage this word is applied mainly to two particular classes of "goodness": profound piety towards God and all human deeds that originate in it, and acts motivated by the spirit of *ḥilm*.'²³ Thus, human forgiveness is the epitome of the virtue of *ḥilm*, which is gentleness, kindness and patience.

All three roots do occur in Surah 64:14: O ye who believe! Truly, among your wives and your children are (some that are) enemies to yourselves: so beware of them! But if ye forgive *ta'fū* and overlook *taṣḥaḥu* and cover up (their

faults) *taḡfirū*, verily Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

Yūsuf 'Ali makes the following summary statement:

Three words are used in the Qur'ān, with a meaning akin to 'forgive', but each with a different shade of meaning. *'Aḥī* (here translated 'forgive') means to forget, to obliterate from one's mind. *Ṣaḥāḥa* (here translated 'overlook') means to turn away from, to ignore, to treat a matter as if it did not affect one. *Ḡhāfara* (which does not occur in this verse) means to cover up something as God does to our sins with His grace: this word is particularly appropriate in God's attribute to *Ḡhaffār*. The One who forgives again and again.²⁴

Commenting on 3:134 Yūsuf 'Ali emphasises that the righteous 'do not throw the blame on others. Even where such blame is due and correction is necessary, their own mind is free from a sense of grievance, for they forgive and cover other men's faults.' Both Yūsuf 'Ali and Muhammad Asad translate the Arabic word for people *al-nās* as '(all) men and fellow men', thus having a universal perspective. They perceive human forgiveness as a positive capacity of human nature and a display of good human character.

As in the case of the Gospel we need to briefly discuss the Qur'ān's understanding of the *lex talionis*. The Qur'ān adopted the biblical principle of like retaliation *qisās* (2:178), gave some room for monetary compensation *diya* (5:45) and also left the option of forgiveness: The recompense for an injury is an in-

19 Ambros, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic*.

20 Q 2:178.

21 Q 58:2.

22 Elsaid M. Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* (Brill Online, 2013). <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/dictionary-of-quranic-usage/fw-SIM_001160> accessed 9 July 2014.

23 Toshihiko Isutzu, *Ethico-religious Concepts in the Qur'ān* (Montreal, Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 224-225.

24 Yūsuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, Commentary on Q 2:109.

jury equal thereto (in degree): but if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from God, for (God) loveth not those who do wrong (42:40).

In other words, whoever forgives and does not demand an exact punishment (but accepts an amount of money paid in compensation for physical injuries instead) will be rewarded by God. To forgive (the Arabic root is *'afā*) in this context takes the form of an optional but most desirable virtue. Zeki Saritoprak sums it up well: 'As the verse indicates, the Qur'an presents forgiveness as a beautiful action that God loves.'²⁵

From a Muslim perspective M. Mahdi Allam made the concept of forgiveness in the Qur'an more accessible to western scholarship in an attempt to reconcile the Qur'anic code of punishment with its treatment of forgiveness. He distinguishes between three levels of ideal ethical behaviour, namely the one of God, the one of the prophet and the one of the best type of man, the most pious. Discussing the verses that refer to the average person, he proposes that the teaching on human forgiveness in the Qur'an is not given in the form of a command, but rather takes the shape of a strong recommendation, hence taking into account both man's personal as well as societal interests.²⁶ Muslims are not expected to forgive unconditionally (before they see that justice is done to them).²⁷

II Similarities and Contrasts

1. Similarities

There is no doubt that Jesus and Muhammad share some common ground despite their theological differences. This common ground needs to be welcomed if Christian engagement with Islam is to be positive, fair and informed. We will draw a comparison between the following two texts:

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matthew 6:12).

Those who spend (freely), whether in prosperity or in adversity, who restrain anger, and forgive (the offences of) people—for God loves those who do good (Surah 3:134).

Both texts share the didactic character of the context. They use terminology that denotes human forgiveness. They address behaviour in the realm of personal relationships, not in the context of a court of law. They greatly encourage human beings to forgive others their wrongdoing, thus stressing the reality of evil and human sin, the need for putting relationships right and the human capacity to do so.

Human forgiveness is seen as a very positive concept that includes all people, no matter what their religious affiliation is. It is an ethical imperative (that addresses everyone), a step towards reconciliation (that does not compromise the concept of justice) and a contribution to a peaceful coexistence (that treats all individuals created by God with the dignity proper to

25 Saritoprak, *Reconciliation*, 83.

26 Mahdi Allam, 'The Concept of Forgiveness in the Qur'an', *Islamic Culture* 41, no. 3 (1967). 139–153.

27 Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Ilham Nasser, 'Forgiveness in The Arab and Islamic Con-

texts', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 41, no. 3 (2013), 474–494.

them). Both verses make it clear that God loves human forgiveness. It represents a beautiful action. Indeed, the texts and their nearer contexts establish a strong connection between divine and human forgiveness.

Not only the Gospel but also the Qur'an presents God as the most forgiving one. He forgives human wrongdoing. The extension of his forgiveness is an act of mercy. Therefore, both Jesus and Muhammad point to the *imitatio Dei* as the way to offer forgiveness and mercy. Both protagonists subsequently become the paragon of forgiveness for believers.

2. Contrasts

'Exploring another tradition should bring contrasts, not just similarities to the surface: and this is what making comparisons means.'²⁸ This statement by Ninian Smart will set the agenda for the following remarks. We will look at different referents, i.e. the context, the foundation and the motivation for human forgiveness.

Matthew 6:12 is set in the *context* of worship in general and prayer in particular. Jesus teaches his followers that their relationship to God directly affects their relationship to their neighbours. God's forgiveness always precedes human forgiveness. The latter is a consequence of the former. Thus, God's gracious action stands at the beginning of ethics.

Surah 3:134 on the other hand has to be understood in the context of social ethics. The verse lists a series of

good deeds, among them the act of human forgiveness. We may deduce from the passage that God not only loves this good behaviour but also promises a reward for it—God's eschatological forgiveness. This suggests that human forgiveness may influence God's forgiveness. The former can be seen as a claim for the latter. Ethics arises out of God's revealed law.

In both texts, there is a strong link between divine and human forgiveness, suggesting that the former provides the *foundation* for the latter. Even though with the exception of Surah 9, all 114 Surahs begin with the statement, 'In the name of God, most gracious, most merciful', the theme of God's forgiveness in the Qur'an is peripheral to its key topics which are God's oneness and his justice. For Jesus, however, this theme lies at the heart of his message.

In a recent article on a Christian Trinitarian worldview, J. Scott Horell discusses the framework of forgiveness both in Christianity and in Islam: 'Because the God of the Bible is Trinity, he is "big" enough to be both perfectly just and perfectly forgiving to all who trust in the Son.'²⁹ On the other side, in Islam believers have to cast themselves on divine mercy without knowing whether they receive it or not. Horell makes the point that 'all Muslims believe God forgives, but the question is how?'.³⁰

When Jesus met a paralytic, he said

²⁸ Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural explorations of human beliefs* (New York: Scribner's, 1983), 19.

²⁹ J. Scott Horell, 'In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Toward a Transcultural Trinitarian Worldview', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 38, no.2 (April 2014): 135.

³⁰ Horell, 'In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit', 134.

to him, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'³¹ The audience rightly understood this statement as a claim for being God, whereas the paralytic heard it as an absolute assurance of God's forgiveness in the here and now. Muhammad, on the other hand, introduced a God whose forgiveness may (or may not) be received in the future only. Surah 3:136 illustrates this point well: 'For such the reward is forgiveness from their Lord, and Gardens with rivers flowing underneath, an eternal dwelling: How excellent a recompense for those who work (and strive)!' Because of God's absolute sovereignty, humankind cannot predict what will happen and may not prescribe God's behaviour. But the God of the Gospel has committed himself to forgive people immediately who turn to him in faith.

The striking difference lies in the ground on which God forgives sin. In the Qur'ān he does so because of his power and omnipotence, but in the gospel God forgives sin because of his atoning self-sacrifice which demonstrates the perfection of both God's justice and God's mercy. The just God demands that sin be atoned for, and then, in the person of his only Son, makes atonement for the sins of the world himself. For this reason he has shown himself to be a merciful God.

The Qur'ānic position instead holds that atonement for sin is 'what men and women do with their own sin through repentance and through expiation, through prayers, fasts, sharing their wealth with the poor, and so on.'³² Another striking contrast seems

to be the reason for forgiveness. The God of the Gospel forgives out of love, whereas the God of the Qur'ān offers forgiveness out of his sovereign power.

We may notice another marked difference in the *motivation* for human forgiveness. According to Matthew 6:12 the person who has been granted forgiveness from God will forgive the offences of other people out of generosity, gratitude and an awareness of his own indebtedness. Jesus elaborated on this in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35). In a recent exegesis of this parable Jesper Tang Nielsen points out that the servant, despite the cancellation of his huge debt, still remains in the debt of the king, for now indeed he has received his whole existence from him.³³

In the kingdom of generosity the gift of forgiveness is meant to be passed on out of gratitude and not to be traded out of calculation. When the servant initiates the breakdown of their relationship the king demands justice. In other words, the person who withholds forgiveness from others or treats it as a trading object has broken the chain of generosity. We see that the unconditional forgiveness among people is rooted in the unconditional forgiveness of God.

Surah 3:134 suggests that human forgiveness is an expression of human kindness, piety and power. The semantic field indicates a virtue which arises out of a good human character. Human

Muslim view of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2007), 94.

³³ Jesper Tang Nielsen, 'Das Gleichnis vom Schalksknecht. eine Ökonomie der Generosität', *Zeitschrift für Neues Testament* 16, no.31 (2013), 31–9.

³¹ Mk 2:5.

³² Mahmoud Ayoub and Irfan A. Omar, *A*

forgiveness is considered to be a good deed practised by pious people (not sinners), a commendable action and an exemplary behaviour. It promises reward in the here and now. Such a beautiful action does not only enjoy the gratitude and appreciation of fellow humans but also may hold the prospect of God's approval and forgiveness. Surah 3:135-136 goes even further and suggests that all believing Muslims do receive forgiveness and entrance into Paradise if they turn to God and ask his pardon:

And those who, having done something to be ashamed of, or wronged their own souls, earnestly bring God to mind, and ask for forgiveness for their sins—and who can forgive sins except God? and are never obstinate in persisting knowingly in (the wrong) they have done. For such the reward is forgiveness from their Lord, and Gardens with rivers flowing underneath, an eternal dwelling: How excellent a recompense for those who work (and strive)!

Other Medinan verses that associate God's forgiveness of human beings with their forgiveness of others also promise reward on the Day of Judgement for those who practise forgiveness and punishment for those who commit evil.

2:109 Quite a number of the People of the Book wish they could turn you (people) back to infidelity after ye have believed, from selfish envy, after the Truth hath become manifest unto them: But *forgive* and overlook, till Allah accomplishes his purpose:³⁴ for Allah hath power over all things.

24:22 Let not those among you who are endued with grace and amplitude of means resolve by oath against helping their kinsmen, those in want, and those who have left their homes in Allah's cause: let them *forgive* and overlook, do you not wish that Allah should forgive you? For God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

In this way human forgiveness is an essential prerequisite for God's forgiveness in the future. This idea finds expression in the Hadith:

Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, a man used to give loans to the people and used to say to his servant, 'If the debtor is poor, forgive him, so that Allah may forgive us.' So when he met Allah (after his death), Allah forgave him.³⁵

To sum up, apart from mercy the main motivation for human forgiveness seems to be the desire for divine forgiveness.

III Contemporary Reflections

1. In Christianity

a) Roman Catholicism—Josef Ratzinger

Josef Ratzinger (born 1927), a German priest of the Roman Catholic Church, was made a professor of theology at several German universities before he was appointed Archbishop and cardinal. In 2005 he was installed as Pope

³⁴ The Arabic word *amr* is better translated as 'final decision'.

³⁵ Al-Bukhārī, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, trans. M. Muhsin Khan, book 56, number 687 <<http://www.usc.edu/org/cmje/religious-texts/hadith/bukhari/056-sbt.php>> accessed 9 July 2014.

Benedict XVI and remained the head of the Roman Catholic Church until 2013. Previously a liberal theologian, Ratzinger turned conservative and stood up for Catholic doctrines and fundamental Christian values. In view of the increasing secularisation in the West he set out to grapple with the problem of reason and faith. This journey culminated in the publication of a trilogy about Jesus of Nazareth.

In his exposition of the fifth petition (from the Lord's Prayer)³⁶ he sees the overcoming of guilt as the central question of every human existence. Guilt can be overcome only by forgiveness, not by retaliation which would lead to a destructive spiral of violence and evil. According to him, because of the reality of evil, human forgiveness has to be more than just ignoring or forgetting. Guilt must be dealt with, be healed and be overcome. Forgiveness costs the one who forgives, for he has to suffer, absorb and redeem the evil in himself.

Ratzinger lays emphasis on the incapacity of humankind to expiate guilt effectively, on the one hand, and the ability of God to overcome evil by offering up himself, on the other. The cross of Christ is the only effective means of overcoming evil. Because of mankind's inability God takes the initiative in repairing relations, meeting the perfect demands of 'unconditional' mercy and justice.³⁷ For Ratzinger the concepts of forgiveness and sacrifice are closely re-

lated. The petition for forgiveness calls us primarily to be grateful for God's forgiveness and then to be willing to suffer and overcome evil through love.

b) Evangelical Protestantism— John Stott

John Stott (1921-2011) was an English Bible teacher, mission-leader, author and Anglican priest, serving as Rector of All Souls Church, London, for 25 years. He became internationally famous for his leading role in the worldwide evangelical movement and was the architect of the Lausanne Covenant in 1974.

A clear exposition of Jesus' teachings is laid out in his book, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*.³⁸ Commenting on the fifth petition Stott explains that 'debt' is used as a metaphor for sin because it deserves punishment. God's forgiveness consists in the cancellation of the penalty and the charge against human beings. The relation between God's forgiveness and ours (... as we also have forgiven our debtors) is reflected upon in verses 14 and 15 which follow the Lord's Prayer:

This certainly does not mean that our forgiveness of others earns us the right to be forgiven. It is rather that God forgives only the penitent and that one of the chief evidences of true penitence is a forgiving spirit. Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offence against God, the injuries which others have done to us appear by comparison extremely trifling. If, on the other hand, we have an exaggerated view of the offences of others, it

36 Joseph Ratzinger—Benedikt XVI, *Jesus von Nazareth 1* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2007), 192-195.

37 Joseph Ratzinger—Benedikt XVI, *Jesus von Nazareth 2* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2011), 153.

38 Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*.

proves that we have minimized our own.³⁹

In his book, *The Cross of Christ*, Stott notes a difference between human and divine forgiveness even though the fifth petition draws an analogy between the two. The difference relates to the basis of forgiveness. He contrasts the universal God with private individuals as well as sin in the sense of rebellion against God with personal injuries. According to him, Jesus highlighted 'the impossibility of the unforgiving being forgiven, and so the obligation of the forgiven to forgive, as is clear from the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant'.⁴⁰

In the context of overcoming evil with good, Stott elaborates his thoughts about human forgiveness. In his view forgiveness reconciles the retributive and the reformatory, for then it simultaneously accepts the reality of evil and the punishment it deserves and seeks to offer a new beginning and therefore change:

On the cross, by both demanding and bearing the penalty of sin, and so simultaneously punishing and overcoming evil, God displayed and demonstrated his holy love; the holy love of the cross should characterize our response to evil-doers today.⁴¹

Overall, for Stott human forgiveness is a moral responsibility human beings have towards each other, includes minor to major offences, and should be modelled on God.

c) Liberal Protestantism—Hans Dieter Betz

Hans Dieter Betz (born 1931), served as a German Reformed pastor until he moved to the United States in 1963 to take on a teaching position at the School of Theology in Claremont. In 1978 he was appointed Professor of New Testament at the University of Chicago where he became emeritus in 2000. He made his name as researcher on the letters of the apostle Paul, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Gospel of Matthew as well as early Christian literature and the Greco-Roman. Betz also led a number of international research and publication projects, especially as editor-in-chief of the lexica *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (4th ed. 1998-2007) and *Religion Past and Present* (2007-2014).

His commentary *The Sermon on the Mount: A commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain* represents the received wisdom of historical-critical research. As already stated, Betz conceives of human forgiveness in the sense of disposing those obligations that others owe to us. Petitioners ask God for the cancellation of their debts because they are completely unable to make good on them. In presenting this petition, they expect God to show mercy and grant forgiveness which is part of his righteousness.

As a result, petitioners must practise their righteousness too. Without declaring null and void all debts owed to them by other people, petitioners would appear before God in a state of unrighteousness. And this, in turn, would nullify the effects of their peti-

³⁹ Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, 149-150.

⁴⁰ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 88.

⁴¹ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 310.

tion.⁴² For Betz human forgiveness is the unconditional responsibility of human beings, an act people must do, amounting to an oral declaration.

2. In Islam

a) Islamism—Sayyid Quṭb

Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966), an instructor, literary critic and journalist, probably was Egypt's best known Islamic activist of the twentieth century. His devotional commentary on the Qur'ān, *Fī ṣilāl al-Qur'ān* (*In the shade of the Qur'ān*), targeted a wide readership and promoted an understanding of Islam as a timeless body of beliefs and practices with solutions to all aspects of life. Quṭb's reading of the Qur'ān as God's word ignored the heritage of past interpretations. Furthermore, this form of Islamism was set against western Colonialism, Judaism and Christianity.

Quṭb's exposition of Surah 3 takes the setback at Uhud as a point of reference:

The all-ranging advice given here is not altogether removed from the context of the battle. People do not triumph in war until they prevail in emotional, moral and organisational struggles... Suppression of one's anger and forgiving others are essential for victory, because self-control, solidarity and kindness are highly potent forces in a tolerant society.⁴³...The prize is forgiveness by God and admission to heaven. It

is there to be won, and the believers are invited to make their race and vie with one another in order to win. The prize is set for those who fear God.⁴⁴

Commenting on Q 3:134 he states:

The Qur'ānic verse emphasises that the God-fearing do not allow their anger to become a grudge. They forgive others and do not harbour any ill feelings. When anger is deliberately restrained it becomes a burden, a fire which burns internally sending its smoke over man's conscience in order to blur his vision. Forgiveness, however, ensures a release from that burden. It gives peace of heart and conscience, as well as an easy movement in a more sublime world.⁴⁵

Quṭb's concept of forgiveness in human relationships constitutes a spiritual struggle, namely an act of jihad (of the heart) that leads to a greater jihad (of the battle), resulting in the triumph of Islam. It is a rewarding behaviour for those who fear God. At the same time it is a healthy concept that has to do with anger management.

b) Main stream Sunni Islam— Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī

The Egyptian Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (born 1926), has been described as global mufti because he has built up a presence on al-Jazeera television, through his works and in several organisations, which allows him to spread his message globally.⁴⁶ His views place him

⁴² Betz and Collins, *The Sermon on the mount*, 380.

⁴³ Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī ṣilāl al-Qur'ān* (*In the shade of the Qur'ān*), trans. M. A. Salahi (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1999-2003), 158.

⁴⁴ Quṭb, *In the shade*, 178.

⁴⁵ Quṭb, *In the shade*, 179.

⁴⁶ Bettina Gräf and Jakob Skovgaard-Pe-

inside the mainstream of Sunni Islam, sometimes called moderate Islamism. In his approach to Islam in general and to the formulation of fatwas in particular Qaraḍāwī tries to keep a balance between justice and mercy. He calls this concept *wasāṭiyya* (*middle way*) which he derives from Surah 2:143: 'We appointed you a community which stands at the centre.'

On islamonline.com, the influential website associated with him, a 2011 fatwa by an Islamic scholar of the Fatwa Department Research Committee about forgiving others rules that forgiveness 'would be of great benefit to you. However, it is not obligatory on you to forgive a person if that person has wronged you and refuses to make amends by restoring to you your rights.'⁴⁷ In a posting from 2013 on the occasion of the month of Ramadan the correlation between God's forgiveness and ours is illustrated well:

A friend of mine recently sent text to everyone which said: 'I want Allah to forgive all my sins in the month of Ramadan but before I ask him for forgiveness I will ask my sisters to forgive me if ever I hurt them intentionally or unintentionally. By forgiving me you will feel spiritually uplifted and will Insha'Allah gain reward from Allah.' A very simple yet meaningful text which makes us realize that both the forgiver and the person asking for forgiveness

are rewarded by Allah.⁴⁸

Human forgiveness is conceived of as an optional act that benefits the person in the present and in the future.

c) Reformed Sunni Islam— Mouhanad Khorchide

Mouhanad Khorchide (born 1971), is a Palestinian sociologist who specialized in Islamic theology and religious education and currently chairs the Centre for Religious Studies at the University of Münster, Germany. He became famous for the publication of his books *Islam ist Barmherzigkeit* and *Scharia—der missverstandene Gott*.

Based on a contextual approach in reading the Qur'ān, he develops a theology that emphasizes God's love and compassion as the key principle of the Qur'ānic message and applies it to Islamic ethics. The Qur'ān is read as a love letter from God to humanity. In a way similar to the prophet Jeremiah, Khorchide can compare the relationship between God and men to the love and compassion of a mother to her child. Such a notion of God will empower humankind to act out of love and compassion too.

Indeed, the definition of a Muslim is someone who accepts God's invitation to love and compassion, whether he believes in God or not, and therefore becomes a channel for it. The realisation of human needs—both a condition and an expression of love and compassion—is the focus of the Qur'ānic message. Human needs concern all sorts of

tersen. *Global mufti: The phenomenon of Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 12.

⁴⁷ Forgiving others <<http://www.islamonline.com/news/articles/153/Forgiving-others.html>> accessed 9 July 2014.

⁴⁸ Let us open our hearts in Ramadan <<http://www.islamonline.com/news/articles/2/Let-us-open-our-hearts-in-Ramadan.html>> accessed 9 July 2014.

personal, emotional, social, economic, political and medical human interests.⁴⁹

Human forgiveness is considered to be a necessary response to the experience of God's forgiveness. A person who withholds forgiveness from others puts himself outside of God's forgiveness. Human forgiveness is not only the fulfilment of God's commandment but also a prerequisite for God's forgiveness. It is the fruit of a transformative process that leads to fellowship with God. Man's willingness to forgive is also a consequence of his own experience of sinful behaviour.

According to Khorchide human compassion reaches a climax in human forgiveness towards enemies—an idea he borrows from the Christian theologian Edith Olk.⁵⁰ For him the verses in Surah 3:134-136 describe the character and the actions of the pious. These are seen as signs of faith and the result of self-reflection, self-conquest and self-awareness. Human forgiveness should not be practised for opportunistic reasons (in view of reward and punishment which Khorchide understands as pedagogical metaphors) but according to Kant as a self-commitment, out of love, in the sense of *imitatio Dei*. Human forgiveness aids in the process of character formation and perfection.⁵¹

49 Mouhanad Khorchide, *Islam ist Barmherzigkeit: Grundzüge einer modernen Religion* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2012), 170.

50 Khorchide, *Islam*, 113.

51 Mouhanad Khorchide, *Scharia—der miss-*

IV Substantial Differences Remain

Even though we may acknowledge formal similarities between Jesus' and Muhammad's view of human forgiveness in Matthew 6:12 and Surah 3:134 respectively (e.g. they use similar words providing a good starting point for interaction), on closer examination there are important substantial differences. For Jesus human forgiveness is a consequence of God's forgiveness, whereas in the Qur'an the former is a claim for the latter. The theme of forgiveness lies at the heart of Jesus' life and message because it demonstrates God's dealings with us.

In the Qur'an, however, it is peripheral in comparison with God's oneness and his justice, that is to say reward and punishment. For Jesus the unconditional forgiveness among people is rooted in the unconditional forgiveness of God. The same cannot be said of the Qur'an which has an ambivalent attitude towards forgiving others.

This paper could cover only a few aspects of Jesus' and Muhammad's perception of human forgiveness. Future research should investigate their teachings on a broader level. It should further explore their concept of sin, the forgiveness of God and justice with regard to human forgiveness as well as the condition, the scope and the performance of human forgiveness.

verstandene Gott: Der Weg zu einer modernen islamischen Ethik (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2013) 196.