

citizenship, protects religion from ‘the corrupting influences of the state’ (p 12) and promotes religion in the private sphere: in short, it is supportive of religion rather than obstructive.

Though this is a short text of 136 pages – albeit accompanied by a whopping 99 pages of endnotes which, incidentally, go slightly out of phase in Chapter 3 – it is emphatically not an easy read. Nor are all Shiffrin’s judgments necessarily incontrovertible: to assert, for example, in a throwaway comment that ‘the Anglican Church could hardly have benefited from its control by the English government’ (p 35) suggests an extremely idiosyncratic reading of English church history.

That said, however, it is worth making the effort to engage with Shiffrin for two reasons. First, he demonstrates the importance for Americans of disputes about the First Amendment that are often underappreciated by students of law and religion on this side of the Atlantic. The second and more compelling reason is this. Although America is an intensely religious society when compared with most of the countries of Western Europe it is becoming ever more pluralistic and, in religious terms, divided. How its legal system handles the problem of accommodating that pluralism while at the same time holding together society at large may well provide some useful insights into problems that the United Kingdom is increasingly being obliged to address.

FRANK CRANMER

Fellow, St Chad’s College, Durham

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Forgiveness and Christian Ethics

ANTHONY BASH

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In 2002 I officiated at the same crematorium where, on the previous evening, a small funeral had taken place for Myra Hindley. During her long sentence for murder Hindley had publicly stated that she had found faith, joined the Roman Catholic Church, repented and been forgiven by God. However, such was the anger directed toward her in society at large, that when she died it proved difficult to find a funeral director to transport her body from hospital to the crematorium and crematorium staff were nervous of even being present at the time of the funeral for fear of reprisals. Anthony Bash, a solicitor, parish priest and contributor to this journal, approaches the subject of forgiveness with examples such as this in mind. Hindley asked for and felt she had

received forgiveness from God, but that did not then result in her release from prison before her death, neither did it bring with it forgiveness from those closest to her victims. Bash teases out in this work the great complexities that surround discussion of such easily trotted out terms as forgiveness, mercy, justice, reconciliation and absolution.

The book is eminently readable and is peppered with real-life and well-known situations that make understanding the considerable complexity of the work much easier. These situations range from large-scale attempts at reconciliation between peoples with much to repent of and forgive, such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to the smaller and more local example of the priest in the Church of England who resigned her incumbency when she realised that she could not bring herself to forgive the 2005 London bombers who killed her daughter. Particularly moving examples of the difficulties faced by both victims and repentant perpetrators of wrongs are found in the stories of the atrocities carried out by totalitarian regimes in Nazi Germany and Khmer Rouge Cambodia.

Throughout the book Bash weaves together jurisprudence and law, psychology and philosophy, theology and Christian ethics. He has some particularly interesting and well-put thoughts on the effects on Christian views of forgiveness, justice and punishment in the light of the death and resurrection of Christ.

In recent years there has been something of a fashion for public apologies for wrongs committed by past generations given by representatives of the present generation. Such apologies always bring up questions of whether it is possible for the sins of the fathers to be confessed by the children and whether the children of the victims can authentically offer forgiveness. In a world where such public apologies are frequently demanded, the original thought offered by Bash deserves prominence. He concludes that forgiveness is not easy, but if real and costly forgiveness can be sought and given then those individuals and communities that experience this process will be all the richer for it.

WILL ADAM

Rector of Girton, Ely Diocesan Ecumenical Officer

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